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The Hero of the Night

Bradley Denton

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Pat Cadigan

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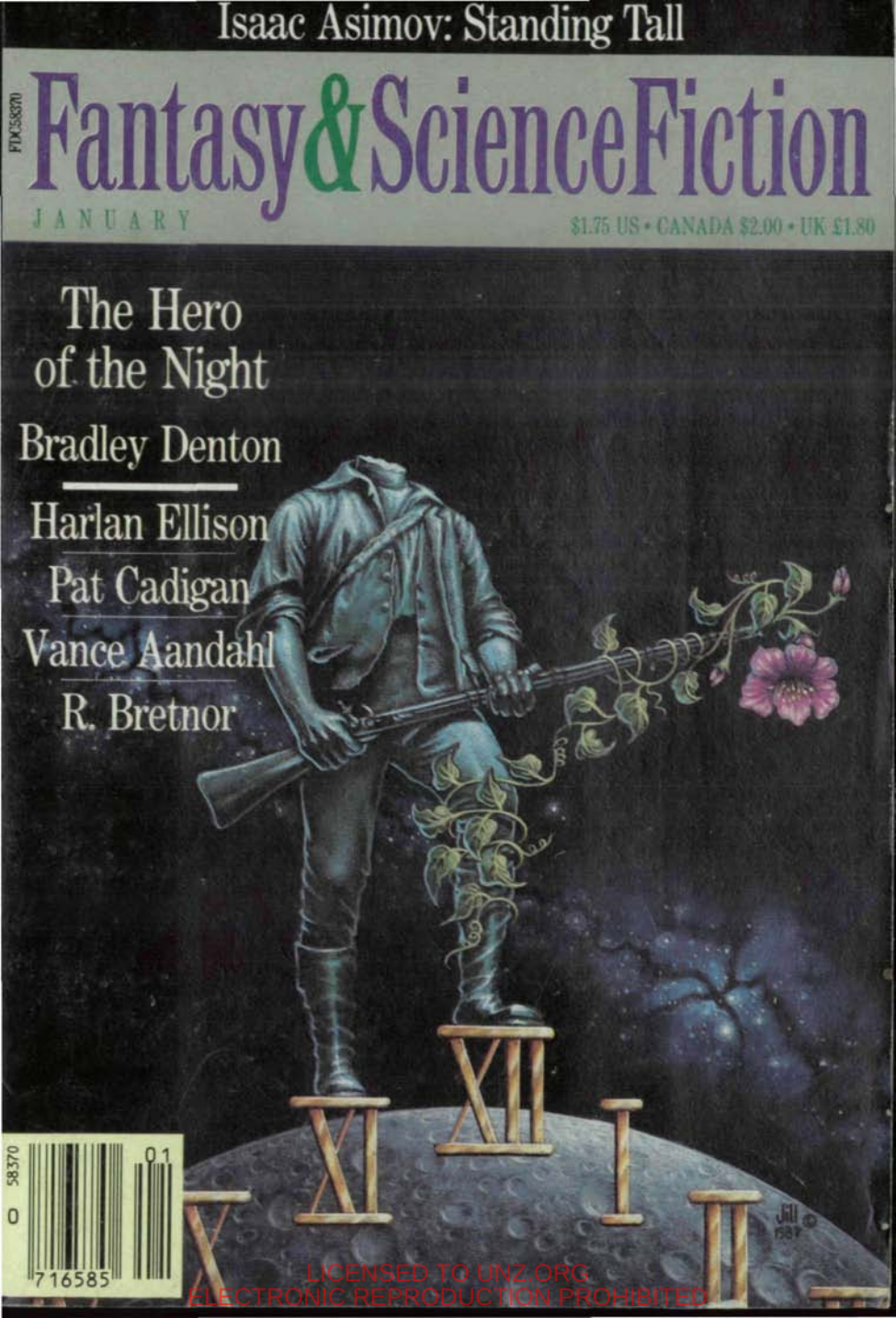

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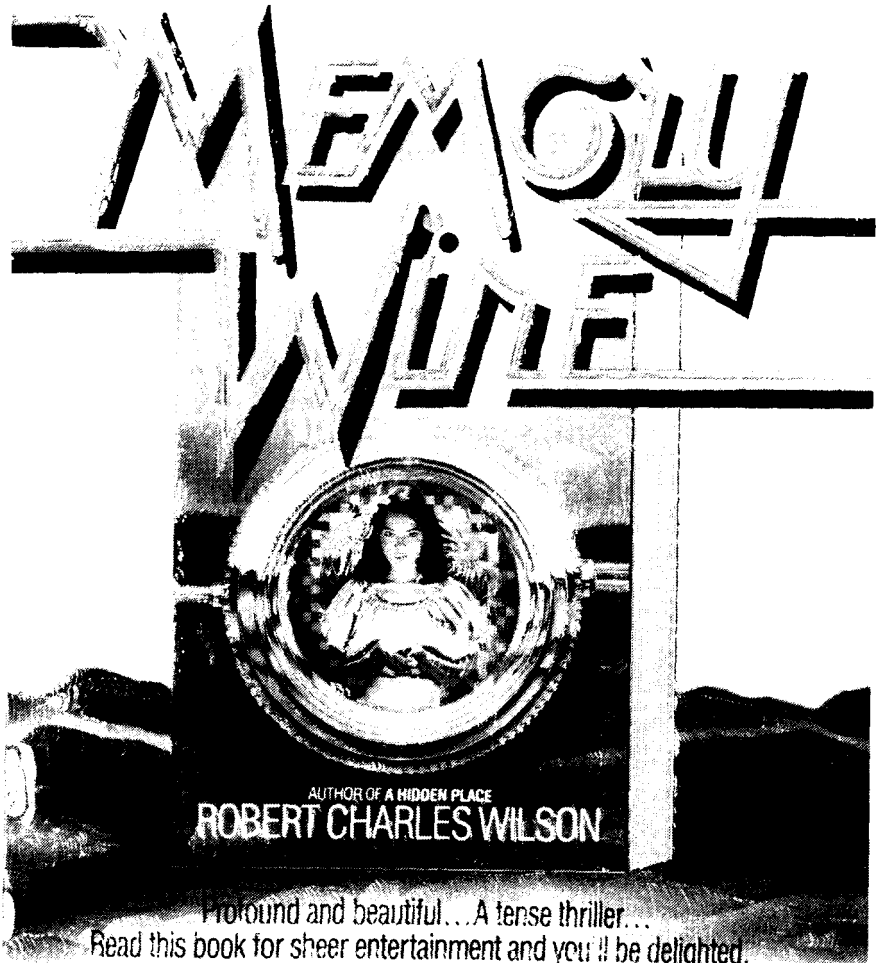

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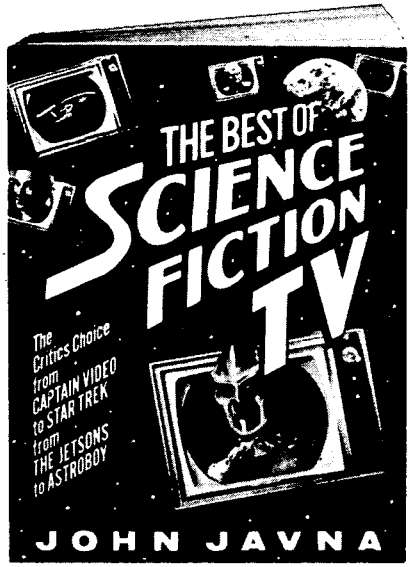

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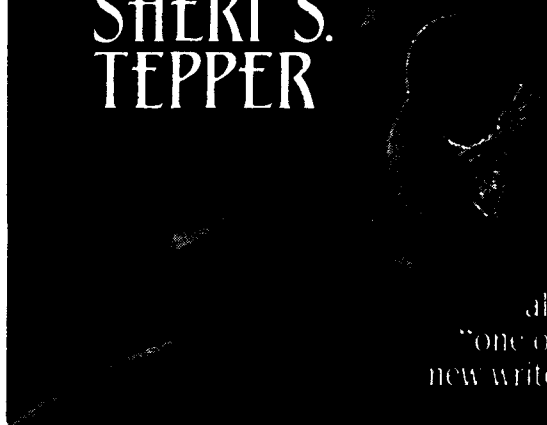

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JANUARY • 39th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

TWO	35	**Pat Cadigan**
THE LAST ARTICLE	91	**Harry Turtledove**
MIRIAM, MESSIAH	134	**Dean Whitlock**

SHORT STORIES

THE HERO OF THE NIGHT	6	**Bradley Denton**
WEDDING PRESENT	60	**Reginald Bretnor**
BLUES AND THE ABSTRACT TRUTH	66	**Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann**
THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY OF ALL	72	**Vance Aandahl**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	22	**Algis Budrys**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	30	**Orson Scott Card**
HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING	80	**Harlan Ellison**
SCIENCE: Standing Tall	123	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: HENRY MARTIN (59), ED ARNO (79), JOHN JONIK (122)

COVER BY JILL BAUMAN FOR "THE HERO OF THE NIGHT"

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The Hero of the Night

By Bradley Denton

CRISPUS USUALLY DIES so soon after awakening that he has no time for reflection, but this life is different. He awoke in this new place as dawn broke, and now, in the brightness of a spring day, he still lives.

As he walks to the university library, though, he sees the signs of what is coming and knows that this incarnation will end as the others have. Already he feels the first tug of his host's urge to meet the fusillade.

His host is a young white woman this time, a child only a little older than poor Sam Maverick was. Crispus wants to pray for her, but the Lord is punishing him, and he cannot expect to be heard.

Even so, as he enters the library, he cannot help asking again: *Is it my fault that I was born with such pride and anger? Is it my fault that a thousand deaths have not quenched their flames?*

There is no response, so Crispus must search for an answer on his own. He flips through the card catalog until he finds a title with the phrase his host knows: *The Boston Massacre.*

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The book stands on its shelf as if it has been waiting for him. The young woman's body trembles as Crispus takes the volume to an empty carrel — *all* the carrels are empty, he notices — to discover what history has to say about him.

His host is a rapid reader. Her intelligence will only make her loss all the worse for those who love her.

Crispus has her memories as well as his own, and knows her more thoroughly than she has known herself. He mourns for the beauty of who she is and for the beauty she might have become. He probes for her consciousness and cannot find it, so hopes that the Lord has already taken her soul.

He does not want her to feel the bullets.

What Crispus finds in the book makes him clench his host's teeth. Incredibly, John Adams, lawyer of Boston, defended Crispus's killers against the charge of murder, saying:

> *This Crispus Attucks appears to have undertaken to be the hero of the night; and to lead this army with banners, to form them in the first place in Dock Square, and march them up to King Street with their clubs. If this was not an unlawful assembly, there never was one. . . .*
> *Now to have this reinforcement coming down under the command of a stout mulatto fellow, whose very looks were enough to terrify any person, what had not the soldiers then to fear? He had hardiness enough to fall in upon them, and with one hand took hold of a bayonet, and with one hand knocked the man down. This was the behavior of Attucks, to whose mad proceedings in probability the dreadful carnage of that night was chiefly to be ascribed.*

Crispus slams the book shut, and the sound echoes through the deserted stacks.

What did his parentage or looks have to do with anything? Did the fact that his mother was black and his father Natick give the redcoats the right to shoot him?

To return for his thousand-and-first death, and to find himself accused of his own murder—

If you were here today, Mr. John Adams, Crispus thinks, *I would split your lying tongue.*

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He cannot recall every detail of every death . . . but of that first, he has no doubts.

He was born a slave in Framingham and ran away at the age of twenty-seven. His master advertised a reward, but Crispus avoided capture by hiring on with a vessel in Boston. He sailed from there to the West Indies, settling in New Providence, and continued to work on various whaling and trading ships.

Eventually he realized that his old master must be dead and that no one would remember Crispus Attucks as being the property of another. So, two decades after leaving as a runaway slave, he returned to Boston as a free man.

But the city itself was no longer free, for the lobsterbacks had come to enforce the king's taxes and to harass free men and slaves alike.

Crispus could not hold his anger in check at the soldiers' bullying. Years before, he had struggled for his own freedom; now he would struggle for Boston's. Or, at the very least, he would help give back to the lobsters some of what they had already given out.

He did *not* seduce his comrades of the fifth of March into following him. Each man joined the others of his own will.

The rope maker, Sam Gray, was a prime example. As the mob approached King Street, Gray told Crispus that three days earlier a soldier had come to the ropewalk where Gray had been working and had demanded that he be hired.

"So you will work, will you?" Gray had asked him.

"I have said so, haven't I?" the soldier had snapped back.

"Then you may go clean my shithouse," Gray had said, turning back to his cable.

The furious redcoat had left then, but had returned with a gang of his fellows. The soldiers had started a fight, but the boys at the ropewalk had beaten them even though some of the lobsters had brandished cutlasses.

Crispus clapped Gray's back upon hearing the tale, and they went on together, shaking their staves above their heads.

Yes, Mr. Adams, Crispus thinks, *some of us carried clubs that night. But the British carried muskets. Which weapon causes the more "dreadful carnage"?*

"Come on, you bloody lobsters!" the crowd cried, throwing ice and

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stones. "Put down your guns, and we're your men!"

Crispus lunged forward through the darkness to grasp a musket barrel, and the soldier jerked the gun up, cutting Crispus's hand with the bayonet. Crispus stumbled back, staring down at his wounded palm—

And then two sharp pains speared into his chest with a heat so great that he was forced to his knees. His comrades panicked, and he was knocked onto his back. Young Sam Maverick staggered past with his mouth agape.

The pain rose up like a storm swell, hurting so much that Crispus could not even cry out. Then it engulfed him, and that was all.

That is the truth of that night, Mr. Adams. If you still believe me to be the cause of it, then you may kiss my ass.

Crispus reopens the book and learns of the death of a man named James Caldwell, whom he did not know, and of the other victims who died later. As he reads, his anger fades and is replaced by a dull sadness.

If he was *not* wrong to do as he did in Boston, then why is he being punished? Why must he suffer death after death after death?

He lowers his host's head onto the book, pressing her cheek flat against the pages. One slender hand lies on the desktop as if already drained of life.

Crispus searches the young woman's mind and finds nothing there of evil. She does not deserve to die.

But neither did any of the others.

After falling to the cobblestones in King Street, Crispus awoke as a small boy. He did not have time to become awestruck at the miracle of his resurrection, though, for his second death came swiftly.

His host was shivering, so cold that he could hardly think, huddling with a cluster of women and children. They were mourning the defeat of their tribe by the longknives.

Crispus had been alive for less than a minute, when a huge mass of strangely clothed soldiers on horseback charged into the camp with their swords drawn and their guns thundering. The air filled with smoke and screams. Crispus tried to run away through the snow, but even in his panic, he knew that his frostbitten, wasted body could not escape.

He felt the vibration of the horse coming up fast behind him and tried

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to dodge, but his host's feet and legs were too cold. The horse ran him down, crushing his spine. The soldier rode on, leaving Crispus to suffer white spikes of agony, but another came soon after and put a bullet into his head.

Even with that wound, Crispus lived long enough to feel something worse than what he had felt in Boston. This time his pain was steeped in despair.

The veins in the young woman's hand stand out in blue relief as Crispus knots the fingers into a fist. He hates being her, hates knowing that her mind will soon be dead and empty. A few of her memories will stay with him, but none of them will ever be hers again.

He closes her eyes and sees buildings of glass and steel so high that their tops seem to shrink to nothing. He sees winged ships carrying people into the sky and around the world. He sees men in thick white suits standing on the moon.

Yet as wondrous as these things are, they do not surprise him, for he has caught glimpses of their approach over the decades. They are simply part of the changing world, the world that he saw changing even during the forty-seven years of his first life.

He looks at his host's wristwatch and sees that he has lived for more than six hours. The Lord is giving him extra time to examine and repent of his sins.

But the longer he stays alive, the more deaths he remembers; and with each of these memories, he asks, *Why must there be such pain in the world?*

And why must I feel so much of it, over and over again?

It is so . . . lonely.

Crispus presses his host's face hard against the book as he remembers the death he experienced immediately before becoming her. Its sting is fresh.

He was a child for at least the hundredth time — a little girl who knew only hunger, mud, and fear. Her life up to the point that he became her had been nothing but misery, and he knew that it would get no better.

The wild-eyed soldiers who came into the village wore filthy clothing of green and brown. Crispus did not know how many there were, because

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as they arrived, his host's mother picked up the child and held her tight. Crispus found himself covered with a conical grass hat, enclosed as though he were in a tent.

Shouting and waving, the soldiers herded everyone into a ditch, and then the explosive rattling noises started. Crispus, responding to an imperative built into his host, began to weep.

The mother's body jerked, pushing him down.

"Bloody *lobsters!*" he tried to cry, but his host's mouth filled with mud.

Then came the pain, razor-keen but quick, and he awoke as a college student.

Crispus opens the fist as his host's head rises from the book. He is startled for an instant at the touch of her long hair on her cheek.

He wants to continue reading, but the young woman's death urge comes in full force now, overwhelming him. As she stands, he can hear the shouts and chants and threats beginning outside. He wishes the noises were as far away as they sound.

His host's thoughts flood in and mix with his. He sees her as she was yesterday, walking past a Guardsman who had a flower stuck in his rifle barrel.

Flowers are better than bullets.

They leave the library stacks. Crispus knows that his host is not planning to take part in the demonstration, and for a moment he clings to the useless hope that she will survive after all.

She blinks as she comes out into the sunshine. Crispus is a mere passenger now; he can do nothing more than watch as they move toward the mob, toward the Guardsmen, toward the guns.

It hurts a lot this time.

Crispus awakens with the knowledge that only eleven days have passed since his previous death. Never before has so little time elapsed between incarnations.

He is outside in the sun again, but the day is hotter, more humid. His host, a young black man, is sweating. The demonstration has already begun.

Brothers dying for nothing.

A voice bellows, sounding as though it has come from the sky, and

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He begins to long for a true death, for oblivion, for anything that will make it stop.

orders them to disperse. The white cops move toward them.

The man beside Crispus throws a rock.

Then the familiar gunfire comes, and the rock thrower falls. Crispus leans down to help, and his host's insides become an inferno.

He falls, too, living just long enough to hear someone shout, "God-damn *niggers!*"

Twenty-three more lives come in quick succession, some of them so brief that Crispus cannot even breathe before the bullets hit. He begins to long for a true death, for oblivion . . . for anything that will make it stop.

Then he awakens as a woman whose mind is so self-controlled and serene that he cannot help but share her calm. The blood of three races courses through her veins, and despite her sex, Crispus feels almost like himself.

The woman is alone in her one-room apartment, her golden fingers resting on the keyboard of a portable computer. Crispus has seen such machines in the minds of his most recent hosts, but this is the first time that he has been close to one.

The words on the flat blue monitor glow a soft amber, and Crispus reads what his host has just written:

That our government cannot comprehend the reasons for our anger should come as no surprise; thirty years ago the official response to the uprisings of that era was much the same. For example, after armed "peace officers" killed two members of a protest rally, the president was heard to ask the head of the victims' college, "Look, what are we going to do to get more respect for the police from our young people?"

Crispus remembers being told of similar questions from Governor Hutchinson in Boston: "What has happened to respect for the soldiers of the Crown? What are we to do about the young ruffians who roam the streets at night?"

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Drawing on the skill of his host to operate the keyboard, Crispus writes:

Why do the people still allow Tories to hold positions of power? And why do these same Tories always blame dissent on the rebelliousness of the young? I was in my forty-eighth year when I challenged the red-coated bastards in King Street, and I am almost three hundred years old now. Yet despite all that God and man have done to me, I am ever angry, ever rebellious, ever

He stops writing as he sees the face of his host reflected in the monitor. Her hair is long and dark; her mouth is firm and strong; her eyes are piercing and clear.

Crispus stands and walks to the narrow bed on the other side of the room. It is true that he is still angry, rebellious, and proud . . . but it is even truer that he has become sick of death.

He sits cross-legged on the mattress. A single translucent window in the west wall catches the last light of the day, warming the woman's skin as Crispus looks around at the room. The walls are covered with photographs, and the faces of girls and boys smile out everywhere. The woman works with children who have been hurt by their parents, teaching them that they are valuable, that they matter.

She lives simply. All of her clothes fit into a chipped four-drawer bureau. All of her cooking is done with a tiny microwave oven. Her bicycle, which leans against the foot of the bed, is her sole means of transportation. The room has no shelves, so her books are stacked against the walls, reaching up to the photographs like towers of words.

Crispus feels something like love for this woman. He wants her to live.

What would happen, he wonders, if he were to trap her so that she could not go out to meet her doom? Would she die anyway? If she survived, would Crispus survive as well? Could they live together, sharing one body, one brain?

Crispus decides to find out.

He probes the woman's mind for possible methods, hurrying for fear that the death urge will come soon. It takes him less than a second to find something that might work.

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He walks into the doorless, closet-sized bathroom and searches through the jumble of tools in the cabinet under the sink until he finds the spray can labeled INSTANT EPOXY. Then he returns to the main room, locks the hollow steel door, and sprays the doorknobs and lock until they are encased in a thick, clear coat. The fumes give his host a headache.

As soon as he has finished with the door, he goes to the window and sprays its lock as well, emptying the can. The windowpane is made of stiff, heavy plastic, and he does not think his host could break it — but to make it tougher still, he fetches a roll of metallic tape from the bathroom and covers the pane with silver strips.

The light that had filled the room fades with each strip of tape, and by the time Crispus is finished, the only illumination in the apartment comes from the amber glow of the computer monitor.

Crispus drops the empty cardboard ring and crosses back to the door. The knob and lock will not budge.

But he is still not satisfied, for this host is strong and clever. He wants to immobilize her.

A chain with an electronic combination lock is wrapped around part of the bicycle frame, but the woman knows the combination. As Crispus racks her brain, though, he discovers that she keeps a metal box containing legal documents under the bed. The box is secured by an old-fashioned padlock whose key is hidden in the bureau's bottom drawer.

Once Crispus has opened the padlock, he slides the key out under the glued door and makes certain that his host cannot reach it. Then he goes into the bathroom and empties her bladder and bowels. When he comes out, he switches on the ceiling light and moves the computer table over to the bed. That done, he goes to the stacks of books and selects several volumes at random, tossing them onto the mattress.

Finally he unwraps the chain from the bicycle frame. Then he sits on the edge of the bed and loops the chain around the woman's right ankle.

When he is certain that the chain cannot be slid off the bed frame and that it is pulled so tight that his host cannot work herself free, he slips the padlock through the end links and snaps it shut.

Then he waits.

One of the books on the bed is a thick paperback anthology on civil disobedience. For a moment, Crispus considers tossing it back to its stack

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against the wall; but then, assuring himself that the woman is safe no matter what he reads, he picks it up and turns to an essay on the Massacre.

He is surprised to find himself referred to as "the first martyr of the American Revolution," but what surprises him even more is an excerpt from the diary of John Adams, dated July 1773, that is in the form of a letter to Governor Hutchinson:

To Tho. Hutchinson/Sir:

You will hear from Us with Astonishment.

You ought to hear from Us with Horror. You are chargeable before God and Man, with our Blood.

The Soldiers were but passive Instruments, were Machines, neither moral nor voluntary Agents in our Destruction more than the leaden Pelletts, with which we were wounded.

You were a free Agent.

You acted, coolly, deliberately, with all the premeditated Malice, not against Us in Particular but against the People in general, which in the Sight of the Law is an ingredient in the Composition of Murder. You will hear further from Us hereafter.

John Adams

Crispus takes a tremulous breath. It is infinitely strange to know that these words came from the pen of the man who condemned him at the soldiers' trial. There meaning, however, is clear: By 1773, John Adams blamed Governor Hutchinson, not the mulatto Attucks, for the Boston Massacre.

With that in mind, Crispus decides that he must forgive Adams for the lawyer's earliest remarks. But as he does so, he realized that he must then also forgive the men who shot him on that cold March night.

The thought is troubling, for it suggests that he must in turn forgive everyone who has killed him in each of his incarnations.

He lies back on the mattress, painfully aware of the ankle chained to the bedpost, and covers the woman's eyes with one hand. Adams he can forgive, and perhaps even the soldiers at the Custom House. . . .

The Soldiers were but passive Instruments. . . .

You were a free Agent.

Is it so in every case? Crispus wonders. Is there always a Governor

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Hutchinson in a mansion somewhere, staying safe and pampered while his Machines commit his murders?

He thinks back over his many deaths and remembers seeing a horrible kind of lust in the eyes of some of his killers. Those men he can never forgive, even if it means that the Lord will punish him for all eternity. But he can also remember the faces of other killers — some who seemed tortured and frightened to the point of wildness, and some who seemed empty of all emotion, as if their blood had been drained and replaced with water.

Those frightened or empty ones, Crispus concludes, could not have been in possession of their own souls. Their souls, then, he will forgive.

The Hutchinsons of the world are another matter.

He dams their invisible faces.

Crispus is reading in the book again when he feels the first tremors of his host's urge to escape and die. Her ankle twists inside the tight loops of chain, chafing the skin so badly that he is afraid she will bleed.

Listen to me, he thinks fiercely. *If you leave this room tonight, you will not live to see the morning.*

The twisting and pulling weaken slightly, but in the woman's heart, Crispus can still feel her desire to join her friends. He thinks again that he should not have selected this particular book . . . but he cannot stop reading yet, for he has found another passage about himself:

> *"A "Crispus Attucks Day" was first held in Boston in 1858. The primary speaker, Wendell Phillips, claimed that the shot heard round the world was not fired at Lexington. Rather, Phillips asserted, that shot was fired in Boston.*
>
> *"Who set the example of guns!" Phillips asked. "Who taught the British soldier that he might be defeated! Who first dared look into his eyes! The 5th of March, 1770, was the baptism of blood. I place, therefore, this Crispus Attucks in the foremost rank of the men that dared. When we talk of courage, he rises, with his dark face, in the clothes of the laborer, his head uncovered, his arm raised above him defying bayonets.*

Crispus closed the book, wishing that he had done so earlier. He knows

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that he is no hero, no personification of courage. He is simply a man who was unwilling to take a blow without striking back.

His host's body quivers, then shakes violently, jerking at the chain.

Crispus flings the book across the room. Its words have made the woman's desire to sacrifice herself stronger than ever.

As he throws the book, he sees his bitter questions about Tories glowing in the computer screen. He turns away, afraid to face their bright rage.

Crispus picks up another book, an old volume of stories and essays about the future. This, he thinks, should provide some distraction. Dreams and fantasies are what he and his host need.

But the book is not what he expects, for most of the pieces are about war and injustice. His host's chained ankle begins to bleed.

He curses aloud and hears the woman's voice for the first time. Even in cursing, it is gentle.

Despite himself, Crispus continues reading, and his eyes light upon an essayist's list of "Commandments for Survival." The first of these Commandments says, NEVER THROW THINGS AT MEN WITH GUNS.

The woman struggles harder, and Crispus finds himself wanting to struggle with her.

A corollary to the Commandment says, NEVER STAND BESIDE SOMEONE WHO IS THROWING THINGS AT MEN WITH GUNS.

Crispus rips the page from the book and crumples it. Then he reaches for the computer keyboard and writes:

If armed men wrong you, whether of their own wills or at the bidding of another, then you must fight them. Though they have muskets and you have only stones and ice, I say throw what you have and Survival be damned. And if armed men wrong your friend instead, then I say stand beside your friend and throw stones and ice together!

Crispus hesitates, realizing that with every word, he slips closer toward defeat in the battle he has set out to fight today.

But he cannot stop himself. *If you do not do these things,* he writes, *then I say you are a coward and undeserving of Survival, or of the title of Free Man.*

"Or Free Woman," his host's voice says.

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Crispus sits as if frozen for a long moment. Then, tentatively, he probes through the woman's mind and finds her, awake and alive.

"I throw words," she tells him. "The targets react as though the words *were stones or ice, but I will not stop.*"

Crispus stares at his host's reflection in the monitor. I do not even know what you are fighting for.

She gives him a vision of fire, blood, and pain in a small faraway country.

Crispus's anger flares. The name of the small country does not matter; what matters is that he has seen all this before, and that he hates it.

"Free me," his host says.

Crispus knows what will happen — and since the woman can see his thoughts, she knows, too. She knows everything, and yet she wants to go. She wants to fight despite the fact that the fight will kill her.

Crispus decides that he does not have the right to save her.

As for himself. . . .

He is a strong man, and can stand another painful transition into the future.

He has seen the colonies become a nation, and the nation become a mighty power. Perhaps, if he continues hurtling onward through the years, propelled by the burning sting of bullets, he will see something even greater come to pass.

Perhaps he isn't being punished after all. Perhaps he is being rewarded with the chance to see the day when Death is finally defeated.

He stretches his host's body out along the bed until her hands are able to grasp a bicycle spoke. It takes all of the woman's strength and costs her more blood, but the spoke breaks free from the rim.

Crispus unhooks the spoke from the wheel hub, then lowers his host to the floor and crawls to the door, dragging the bed behind him. After several minutes of trying, he is able to snag the padlock key with the spoke and to pull it back inside.

When the woman's leg is free of the chain, Crispus limps into the bathroom and finds a screwdriver in the cabinet. The apartment door has three hinges, but he discovers that he has to unfasten only two before the door leans far enough to allow an escape.

Satisfied? Crispus asks. But his host has said all that is necessary, and remains silent.

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Crispus takes a short, thick candle from the top of the bureau and lights it with a match. He begins to leave then, but stops with one foot outside the narrow passage.

He turns and walks back to the computer. There, in amber, are his last words, to which he adds two final sentences.

Though I die, I, Crispus Attucks, am a Free Man and have no need of your mourning or prayers. Mourn and pray instead for the Tories, for they will indeed hear further from me hereafter.

He hits the SAVE button and leaves the apartment.

In the moonless night, a flurry of snow creates white halos around the streetlamps. Crispus shields his small flame with his host's palm, and as he walks, he sees hundreds of other flames converging at the foot of a dark hill at the edge of the city. There the flames become one tremendous dancing light, and the men and women inside that light begin singing an insistent song of protest.

Crispus feels outrage heating the winter air as he joins the crowd, and he knows he is home.

An inhuman voice shouts down from the top of the hill. "YOU ARE TRESPASSING ON GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. DISPERSE AT ONCE."

"*We* are the government!" the man beside Crispus cried, and the words ripple out from person to person until the chant shakes the earth.

Crispus grins. *Put down those muskets, you bloody lobsters, and we're your men and women.*

Then, feeling a joy that he has not felt for almost two and a half centuries, he links arms with his friends and ascend the hill, his fire defying the darkness ahead.

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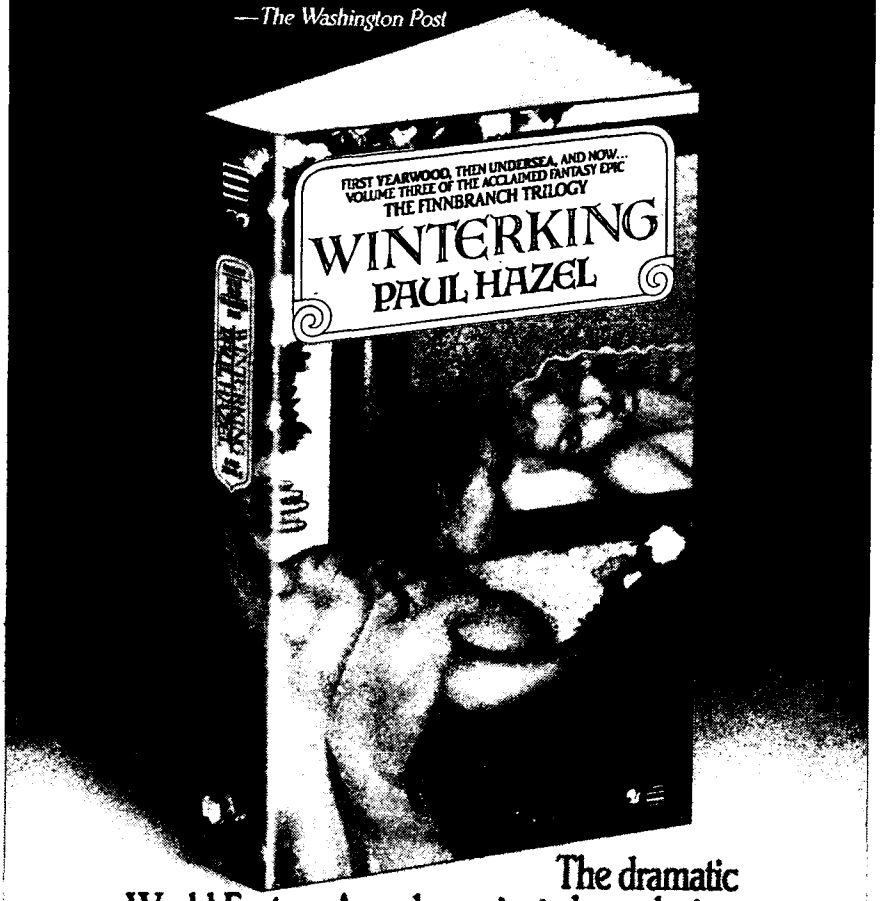

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Some thoughts occasioned by

An Alien Light, Nancy Kress, Arbor House, $17.95

. . . and some other thoughts

OVER THE years, I have come to the conclusion that survivors of age-old starship crashes should be shot when found.

On any given day, the parcel-post or UPS man is liable to bring me as many as three novels in which the whole gimmick is that even the most civilized and technological of people will almost overnight revert to barbarism if stranded on an unknown planet. And they will, furthermore, all talk like this: "By the three moons and the hand of N'mwungu, I say it is forbidden to speak of the things only gods may know!"

No matter how well written — and some of them *are* literate — I've noticed they have a fundamental drawback. The neolithic culture is just another neolithic culture, lent an SF fillip by having these tribesmen be Earth-originated humans on a planet different from — but not too different from — Earth.

What they then have are neolithic characteristic conflicts. That is, whether the author is doing it from shrewdness or not, the chances are very low that we are going to see anything we can learn something new from. And the author, too, gains less growth than he or she might have if the same amount of creative work and perspiration had gone into a work that was more than just a recapitulation of Anthropology 101.

[This is not as yet a review of fantasy novelist Nancy Kress's first science fiction novel, *An Alien Light*. This is a stage-setting for the review. Stay with me.]*

You may ask: Is every writer always to be expected to regard the

*By the way, I learned this journalistic technique from Harlan Ellison, who sometimes says he learned it from me. There are things in this world no one should attempt to unravel, no matter how much they tease at us.

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creation of a new product as an artistic exercise? No, I will reply if pressed, what the reader should get is a good read, on the reader's level of "good." In fact, any book, no matter how ambitious, should by my lights avoid giving any sign at any time that its perpetrator was grunting and straining, or, conversely, whistling and singing. (Humming is O.K.) What the writer feels as a person is in many ways irrelevant to what the work is when viewed from outside.

But before you trap me in a major digression, my point here in this regard is that writers should avoid doing the easy thing. If they do it knowingly, that's bad. It's bad ultimately not for moral but for functional reasons; doing the easy thing is seductive, and furthermore it sooner or later produces writer's block in nearly its most virulent form. But if they do it unwittingly, it's worse. That indicates a certain unawareness of the need to challenge one's muse, and one thing that long observation has shown me is that an unchallenged muse will not respect you in the morning.

That can generate the deadliest writer's block: you can now and then produce work but you don't know what the words mean or why any particular one is placed where it is.

But, reader, you might say "What the hell do I care about writer's block or its internal classifications?" I hope you are not saying this, because it should be clear that it's everyone's loss when a writer dies, and it's a queasy thing to be in the same room with a dead writer who is still talking.

Now, we all get old, and it's only polite to let the process shift you in the direction of that sharpest turn in this mortal coil. But when one sees the young dying, that's a different matter, and that, I suddenly realize, turns out to be why I don't respond well to lost-barbarian stories as a genre.

(Or most other forms of barbarian story. They flirt too cozy with Death. But let's not get into that today.)

So one approaches this genre with caution and with low expectations. Define low: If there *is* something new in the genre somewhere, the chances seem slim that any particular new book in it will contain it, or even imitate it well.

Drop the other shoe, Budrys: Nancy Kress's first science fiction novel is a good novel.

First science fiction novels come in two kinds: those from unknowns, and those from people who have built a reputation elsewhere. Of the latter kind, there are those writers who have simply the reputation of

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being able to produce more than one saleable story, and then there are those who build up a certain expectation in some way. Sometimes more than one way. Nancy Kress. for instance, is a Nebula winner, for "Out of All Them Bright Stars," a science fiction story. But her previous books have been three fantasy novels and of a sort that does not much approach the things that science fiction does best. That sort of preamble creates special tensions when the science fiction novel hoves into view.

It first had to create them in the author, who — although Kress is a remarkable person — probably couldn't escape an awareness while working on it that it would be examined by literary arbiters* with special expectations. Can she handle science fiction? What particular thing is she setting out to do that couldn't be done as well with her more accustomed form of book-length speculative fiction?

All this had to operate on the editor, too, and perhaps on the publisher, certainly in some way on the book's publicists, and that means it operated right back on the author again. The working conversations an editor has with a writer in Kress's position, as the manuscript proceeds from her keyboarding toward the day the editor accepts it, operate against a different background from those conducted with people who represent less of a risk of expectations unmet. And there's the fact that the publicist's job is to build those expectations, or declare that they have in fact been exceeded, when everyone who reads the news releases knows they don't emanate from a disinterested source. And on, and on, and the blurb writing, the mailing out of advance copies, perhaps the introductory party of key literary arbiters . . .*

And then we watchful creatures must do our business on it. There is a certain tension upon us, too. It's not all beer and skittles in the arbiter game, my friend. Once worked into the community consensus, perceptions of early novels by good writers are apt to freeze those writers into a particular configuration of some kind — look at what has happened vis-á-vis William F. Gibson — and thereafter they have to deal with the tension of what "the public expects."

What does he mean by that? Not that Gibson, for instance, is going to be particularly influenced in his development by the fact that others have built a school of SF-writing around *Neuromancer* and others have given that school a name . . . though he surely does feel something of an ef-

*Ahem.

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fect on his art from that. Nor do I mean that it was the reviews and other forms of consequent think-piece, first on *Neuromancer* and then on the whole interactive structure called Cyberpunk, that gave Gibson his status, anymore than the second croquet ball is what the mallet struck. But they have defined Gibson for the market, and it is the marketers — the publishers, the publicists, and their immediate representative at the author interface, the editor —who will to some larger or smaller extent make known to Gibson their discomforts, and perhaps their large bafflements, each time Gibson takes too large a step away from bringing in some more of what went before. How long a step is Kress taking? Et cetera.

An artist shouldn't have to deal with that. There is enough to occupy the mind; the muse is a harsh mistress. But going before the public is part of what art is; any form of speculative fiction particularly in SF at this luxuriant time — it is where it's at. So what is it that the arbiter's going to say, at this stage in the career of Nancy Kress, that might contribute to difficulties for her later . . . that might in even some small way throw not a hobble around steps she might have taken unimpeded, but perhaps a cobweb, perhaps just the last cobweb needed to in some way someday put her in a place away from where she might have gone had her stride been free of impediments?

In that situation, the wrong sort of praise is just as bad as incompetent blame. So shall we then praise Nancy Kress nevertheless? I see no way out of that, unless it be to find a sort of blame better than praise.

So, then:

An Alien Light begins with the classic Lost Barbarian situation: On a planet of which the Terran Federation, or whatever, does not know, the remote descendants of a human starship crash have reverted into two irreconcilably opposed tribes, the Jelites and the Delysians. The bellicose Jelites, out-doing Sparta, are ruled by a harsh and rigid code of honor. Their elite class are the warriors, male and female; ordinary citizens are valued only to the extent that they keep society going well enough to support the warriors. Female warriors take each other for lovers. Male warriors use whores. The whoring class — all female — is composed of the children of whores, and captured female Delysians.

The Delysians present a more "civilized" aspect at first. They buy and sell, support craftsmen, and, though pressure from the Jelites

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has caused them to train soldiers, appear to be more amenable to sophisticated views of reality. This, however, does not prevent them from exiling Ayrys, the glassblower, separating her from her young daughter, who might well have to become a Delysian whore if she is to support herself.

When we first see Ayrys, she is in desperate flight across a deadly wasteland, shocked by grief and loss, aware that she might not live through the night, and not sure that she wants to live through it. Her crime has been in creating a new sort of glass sculpture — one that recalls the frightful double-helix symbol that has been handed down through the culture without anyone knowing its significance. It was an honest, sincere, not to say well-executed piece of art, and surely, she thought, that was the important thing about it. But it did not meet community standards of decency, in a community where, we can now see, the rigidity is middle-class but just as indurate in its own way as the Jelite code of honor.

In the wasteland, she almost inadvertantly saves the life of a barely post-adolescent Jelite female warrior, Jehane, and, calling on the Jelite code of honor, compells Jehane to protect her on the journey to their almost hopeless mutual destination. Outraged, Jehane has no choice within her own cultural matrix; she must agree, though Ayrys, like all Delysians, in her eyes is a contemptible "bargainer," and, like all Delysian females, a whore.

All of this, taken word for word, is the usual furniture. But Kress's manuscript begins with a scene that introduces the first of several well thought-out changes on the old format. The opening words of the novel introduce the Ged, a starfaring alien race who have found these humans unbeknownst to them. The Ged, an ancient people culturally bound by the concept of total harmony as the precursor of intelligent action, have for a very long time now been at war with the Terran Federation, or whatever. And humans, unlike any other race that has ever achieved starflight, are bewilderingly inharmonious among each other, forming antagonistic subdivisions often so hostile to each other that the Ged seriously doubt they are actually all one species. But the humans are a serious threat; they are actually winning the war, against ancient Ged technology and expertise.

How could this be? The discovery of a world populated by humans who have forgotten the war seems a golden opportunity to investigate this central paradox, and the Ged set about doing so. They

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create a trap that will attract humans whose behavior can be monitored and analyzed. The trap is a gray, indurate structure that appears on the surface of the lost planet and which, in a human voice, offers rewards to any human, Jelite or Delysian, who will enter it and spend a year inside. It is to this alien "city" that Ayrys is fleeing as her last hope for shelter, fearful though it is, and to which Jehane is proceeding for reasons she does not reveal.

A well thought-out new wrinkle, but based on a solid Campbellian premise as old as, for instance, Arthur C. Clarke's 1945 "Rescue Party." Kress's next salient Sf idea is one that James Blish would have sprung on his readers circa 1952: On a distant island, the stardrive in the crashed ship is still operating; it spews out radiation that has created a culture of often hideous and barely viable mutations among lingering survivors and their descendants, and it also intermittently engages its time-stasis field, so that things freeze in time for extremely long periods, then release. One original crewmember still aboard is attempting to make sense of his situation, unknowingly where Ged probes can observe him, to the bafflement of the Ged research team.

This is an idea I find nifty in the extreme. But it is nevertheless furniture.

Meanwhile, in the Ged lab-city, the Jelites and Delysians play out their cultural imperatives. A very few — Ayrys, and a Jelite male warrior-"priest" (ie., a primitive doctor, culturally tolerated as the only sort of person fit to heal injured warriors, but segregated into a special niche) — actually try to learn from the Ged, who present them with bits of technology, including but not limited to military technology. The overwhelming majority ignore these gifts and the Ged explanations that accompany them, waiting for the jewels promised to those who stay a year, or, if Jelite, taking the militarily useful ones without bothering to study how they work.

Ayrys's and Dahar's increasing involvement in what they have come to call "science" is a hopelessly minor reaction. The Jelites and Delysians begin killing each other, despite any attempt at common sense; they regard as contemptible any attempt to make common cause against the Ged even though they gradually realize the Ged are hostile, and in truth one wearies, or begins to weary, of a cast of characters who do not change and who were not attractive to begin with.

But right about now — well, perhaps, a little late — Kress creates a series of events that distract from

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this, and culminate in the defeat of the Ged and the emergence of technological humans, albeit revoltingly mutated, who will complete the process of bringing the Ayryses and Dahars up out of barbarism. The rather forced love sub-plot anent Ayrys and Dahar is straight out of 1930s-style pulp, but the triumphant events of the ending are 1970 Poul Anderson.

Furniture. Established SFnal elements — though I reiterate my particular liking for the pseudo-Blish — apparently brought in to dress up a tired genre milieu. The expressionless Ged, who communicate the equivalent of smiles and frowns at each other by releasing pheremones, and have three eyes, are reminiscent of several Hal Clement alien races. How, then, is this a good novel? How does its publicity accurately quote editor David Hartwell in calling this the "first big novel of 1988"?

Because it's about something important. Intelligent, sharp-eyed Nancy Kress, equipped with a sufficiently workable narrative style, is a big-league thinker about those parts of human nature which are of particular interest to SF people. And she has brought us through this novel to show us a reasonably proposed demonstration that is precisely human intransigence and cultural rigidity — that is, barbarism in whatever social guise — which may well be vital to survival and progress.

Now, you may not like that idea, and you may even feel that "progress" is a dubious and in any case ill-defined goal. Certainly if presented in a paragraph or two, Kress's proposal is readily rejectable out of hand. Which, one assumes, is precisely why she wrote it up as an extended piece of fiction. "Here," she may be saying, "Watch how it works out." And she makes it work out, as an artist will. You still don't have to agree with it, but you cannot fail to consider it. And if you are an SF person, considering unconventional proposals about human nature is a large part of what you're in this game for.

As some artists will — particularly artists attempting a complex new form for the first time — she has picked up some moves she has seen others use. Even if her use of cliches is in fact an intended signal that there is something particularly science-fictional going on here, it gets a little in the way of the reader and so is perhaps unwise. If it is an outrightedly unconscious collage, then, again, it's something that should in due course be replaced in her technical armamentarium. But if what I say here in any way contributes to a new set perception of Nancy Kress, then let

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that perception be of someone who thinks. Someone who thinks sufficiently well that her next book might appear to be an example of almost any other kind of SF novel, science fiction *or* fantasy, but underneath, characteristically, will be of thought.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Christmas Ghosts, Kathryn Cramer & David G. Hartwell, eds. (Arbor House, cloth, 284 pp, $17.95

WHEN I first read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Men*, I was startled that the 19th-century characters regarded the telling of ghost stories as a natural thing to do on Christmas Eve. It certainly wasn't part of *my* family's Christmas traditions.

And I, for one, am sorry the custom has been lost. Because ghost stories, though scary, have an aura of mystery and awe completely lacking in the Halloween horror that has supplanted them. The ghost story always contains the promise that if you can only find out why the ghost appears, its purpose can be satisfied, the haunting ended.

Cramer and Hartwell have done a wonderful job of resurrecting the old tradition in their anthology *Christmas Ghosts*. Though there was never a requirement that ghost stories told at Christmas had to be *about* Christmas, the editors helped us renew the old connection by selecting only ghost stories with a Christmas setting.

But don't imagine that means these are all sentimental little Christmas charmers! Oh, the first story in the book is calculated to bring tears to the eyes of any reader not made of stone, but the other stories range from the comic (Dickens's "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton" and John Kendrick Bangs's "The Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall") to the chilling (Ramsey Campbell's "Calling Card" and Elizabeth Walter's "Christmas Night.") And it is impossible to classify Dickens's stream-of-consciousness essay "A Christmas Tree,"

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except to say that it is in itself a small anthology of ghost stories.

Have yourself a 19th-century Christmas — buy this book and read a story or two aloud on Christmas Eve. If you have impressionable children, however, choose carefully which ones you read, or I promise that you'll never get the kids to sleep till dawn.

The Folk of the Air, Peter S. Beagle (Ballantine/Del Rey, cloth, 330 pp, $16.95)

The Folk of the Air isn't a wise and witty medieval fantasy like *The Last Unicorn*. Nor is it a slow and intellectual ghost story like *A Fine and Private Place*. But then, those two books aren't much like each other, either. Peter S. Beagle is not a writer who stutters or repeats himself. When he tells a story, he's done with it, and then after a while he tells another that has nothing whatever to do with the first.

Except for this: If Beagle tells it, it's a damn fine story.

The Folk of the Air begins as Farrell arrives in his old hometown of Avicenna, California. The hitchhiker he picked up in Pima tries to rob him; Farrell contrives not to be robbed, in an outrageously funny action scene. Nor does Beagle deny the promise of the first chapter. There is plenty of action, along with wonderful characters and all the rich possibilities of a magical fantasy set within the contradictory world of the Society for Creative Anachronism.

Farrell, an itinerant lutenist who who has managed to avoid anything remotely like commitment in his life, has come home looking for permanence, though he doesn't know it. He stays with his childhood friend Ben, who is living with a strange old woman named Sia. An old lover of Farrell's, Julie, introduces him to the SCA — no, pardon me, the "League for Archaic Pleasures," where a self-centered young lass named Aiffe is rather too deeply involved in her persona as a witch.

But that's all right. Dangerous as she is, Aiffe is holding onto something too big for her, and as Farrell gets more deeply involved in this fervently, deliberately mad society, he begins to find out who a *lot* of people really are — including himself.

What I can't believe is that nobody else has produced a major fantasy novel actually set within the Society for Creative Anachronism. Half the fantasy writers in America today have an SCA identity and attend revels from time to time. (Heck, *I* even declaim ribald poetry in the persona of the lascivious Friar Orison.) But the rest of us will

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have to curse our lost opportunity and delight in Beagle's book.

The Movement of Mountains, Michael Blumlein (St. Martin's, cloth, 289 pp, $17.95)

I met Michael Blumlein at the Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop and read two stories of his: "The Brains of Rats," from the British SF magazine *Interzone* (the story has since been nominated for the World Fantasy Award), and his workshop story. Both were profoundly original, but not easy reading. Cold and austere in tone, his language cut like a scalpel to find the hot beating heart of the story.

So I started reading Blumlein's first book, unsure whether I could enjoy his voice at novel length — and was delighted. *The Movement of Mountains* is as powerful as his short fiction but nowhere near as complexly structured or coldly written.

The narrator is a future doctor named Jules, a man whose life is dominated by his gluttony; he leaves a bleak and plague-threatened future Earth to follow his lover, Jessica, to the only planet where mutacillin, a self-adapting anti-bacterial fungus, can be grown. Jessica is trying to synthesize the active agent in mutacillin; Jules will care for the humans living there — and for the Domers, the giants who actually do the work of harvesting mutacillin.

The Domers bear a disturbing similarity to Jules. They are made from altered human genes, physically huge to do the work, immensely fat to endure the bitter cold of the mutacillin caves. They are cloned and grown, not born, and their bodies break down after five years of unrelenting, murderously hard work. There are other physical differences, some of them planned, some of them sheer carelessness of design; all of them are explained in painful, clinical detail

What gradually becomes obvious is that the Domers are also human, despite the best efforts of the system to teach them otherwise. Jules finds himself drawn to them, fascinated by them, until finally he becomes one of them, in aspiration if not in form.

Blumlein uses his own experiences as a practicing doctor to make the medical details absolutely convincing. The Domers themselves are unforgettable. And Jules, as he writes the book in the form of long letters to his brother, is at once repulsive and fascinating as a human being.

True, there are problems in the book. For one thing, the clinically graphic sex, beginning with the first

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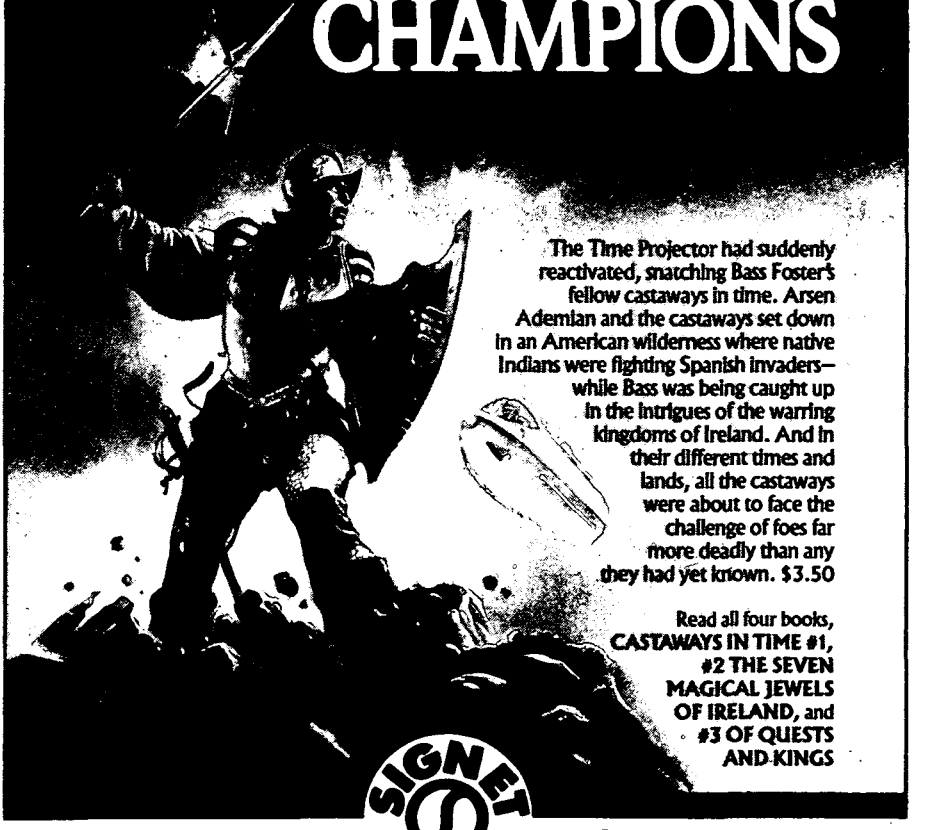

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scene in the book, is off-putting and disturbing. It is also important to the story. You may be offended — I was — but that is part of the flavor of this novel; you are meant to devour it compulsively, even when it tastes nasty. The grammatical slips are especially painful when surrounded by such elegant prose. And Blumlein is at his best at the beginning, setting up the situation, creating the milieu and the characters; at the end, when action takes over, he races through far too much plot, far too quickly, and finally reduces his story to a silly save-the-world-through-brotherhood-and-true-communication riff.

Never mind. Flaws and all, this is a marvelous first novel, and Blumlein, while I doubt he'll soon be a popular writer, is already an important one, because he brings such a strong voice and relentlessly truthful vision to our field.

The Future Focus Book of Lists II: The Sequel, Roger Reynolds, ed. (Future Focus Science Fiction Specialties, 1301 Bernard Ave., Findlay, OH 45840; paper 8.5 x 11; 90 pp; $7.00 includes postage)

* * *

Some of the lists are phenomenally, wonderfully dumb. Some are serious — maybe even intelligent. There are signs that at least some of the contributors to this magazine-format book owe more to David Letterman than to David Wallechinsky in their idea of what makes a good top-ten list — like Marion Zimmer Bradley's "The Ten Least Edifying Lists Which Could Be Made" and Michael P. Kube-McDowell's "Ten Lists I Could Have Turned In But Didn't."

In short, I had a lot of fun reading this. I didn't even mind, not a bit, not for a second, that James Gunn didn't include any of my books in his listing of "A Basic Science Fiction Library." (After all, Barry Longyear's list of "The Ten Stupidest Movies Ever Made" consists entirely of *Enemy Mine*; if he can be self-effacing, I can pretend to have no ego, too.)

All proceeds from sales of this book, after costs have been repaid, go to the Polly Freas Memorial Fund. There aren't many publications around that let you enjoy yourself and feel noble at the same time.

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Since her last story here — "Another One Hits the Road," January 1984 — Pat Cadigan reports a new baby, "Bobzilla, Scourge of the Midwest," and a new novel, MINDPLAYERS, coming from Bantam. Her latest story is about a twelve-year-old girl who knew more about people than anyone should have known at any age . . .

Two

By Pat Cadigan

HE SELDOM TOUCHED her.

Lying on the bed on her left side, Sarah Jane thought about that. She heard the newspaper crackle as he turned the pages. If she rolled over, she would see him sitting at the small table under the hanging light, almost a solid shadow in front of the bright drapes screening out the early-afternoon glare. It would be — was — a sight so familiar she called it a variation on the theme of their existence.

It might have been different if he touched her.

She had read in the magazines he was always buying her that people needed to be touched physically. Children needed hugs to thrive; married people who cuddled were happiest. Sometimes she wanted him to touch her so badly it was like pain.

"Michael?" Her voice was small and powerless in the room. He didn't answer, but she knew he had looked up from the paper. "Could we get married?"

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He laughed briefly, without humor. "No. No, we can't get married."

She hadn't thought so. After a moment she pushed up from the bed and wandered into the clean, clean bathroom to unwrap one of the water glasses. Her reflection in the mural-sized mirror looked peaked. The funny fluorescent lighting they used in hotel bathrooms sucked all the color out of her, leaving her like an old colored photograph about to turn black and white. She patted her long, light brown hair and curled the ends around her fingers. Her face was bony, just like the rest of her, as though she were treading on the sunny side of starvation. It was her thinness, she decided, that made her look sometimes so much older and sometimes so much younger than twelve.

Behind the drapes was a sliding glass door that opened onto a balcony. Michael went on reading the newspaper as she stepped outside and stood in the sunlight with her hands clasped behind her back and her feet apart. A slight wind flapped her shirttails. Not exactly a portrait of a lady, she thought. But she had never figured on being a lady, not her. No chance. Ladies had graceful, refined forms, not bony bodies that were still growing, and they didn't wear thrift shop shirts and faded jeans, and they didn't stand like they had a plank between their legs. And they didn't live in and out of hotel rooms with men like Michael.

She leaned on the wrought-iron railing and looked down at the hotel parking lot, which was beginning to fill up with cars. The cars belonged mostly to middle-aged married couples, coming in for the hotel's Weekend Mini-Honeymoon Special. She had read all about it on a stand-up card by the telephone. Three days, two nights, complimentary champagne the first night and a special buffet brunch on Sunday morning — ninety dollars a couple. She wondered how all those people would react to having her and Michael in their respectable midst. She imagined them walking through the crowded lounge together during the special buffet brunch on Sunday morning, while the husbands and wives stared. *It's O.K.*, she might say to them as they passed, *he never touches me. I'm twelve and he's almost thirty and we're just good friends.* Right. Michael would slap her silly if she told anyone he was closing in on thirty. He could pass for twenty-two or twenty-three. But a slap was a touch, anyway.

Inside the room the phone rang. She closed her eyes. Michael picked it up on the third ring. She didn't listen in. That was one of the rules Michael

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had laid down in the beginning. He said when she could listen and when she couldn't, and if she didn't abide by the rules, he would leave her. A strand of hair blew across her face. She dragged the strand away with two fingers and threw it over her shoulder. Even though she wasn't listening, she knew when he had put the phone down, and she felt him coming to the open door.

"Sarah Jane?"

She turned around. He was smiling. For the millionth time, she thought of how handsome he was.

"I got it set up for tonight. A game. It's safe and it's heavy sugar."

She gave him a split-second, mirthless smile.

"It's not gonna be any different than the other times. Clean pickings." He stared at her. When she didn't say anything, his smile broadened defiantly. "I'm gonna catch a nap now. Wake me up at 6:30. I'll take a shower, and then we'll get some supper before the game, O.K.?"

"O.K., Michael."

His mouth twitched with annoyance. "Practice calling me Uncle Mike, or they'll know something's up."

"O.K., Uncle Mike."

"Right." He took a deep breath and let it out. His dark hair showed mahogany lights in the sun. "No funny stuff while I'm asleep, got it?"

She blinked at him solemnly.

"I mean it." He pointed his finger at her through the screen. "I really mean it, Sarah Jane. I don't like any funny stuff; you know that."

Her gaze roamed over his body. He wasn't a big man. She was nearly as tall as he was, but he was solid, perfectly formed, without a bit of fat to him.

"Hey, why don't you put on your bathing suit and go down to the pool," he said, his voice softening. "Get a little sun. You could use some."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't like being out in public in a bathing suit; you know that."

"Jesus. You're the only female I know who thinks she's too skinny. I know broads that're living on celery sticks and water trying to get a shape like yours."

"I don't have a shape." She turned away and looked down at the parking lot. "Even if I did, I still don't think I'd want to go out in a bathing suit."

"You oughta get some sun, for chrissakes. You're a kid. You're sup-

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posed to go out and play sometimes."

She looked over her shoulder at him sourly. Was he kidding?

His gaze dropped to his feet. "Yeah. Well. Do whatever the hell you want; take some money and go have an ice cream sundae or something; I don't care. Just be sure you wake me up at 6:30. And *no funny stuff.*"

Her face was expressionless now. "O.K., Uncle Mike."

She didn't go back into the room until she knew he was asleep. He had pulled the heavier drape behind the light one to dim the room, and he was lying fully clothed on top of his bed with one arm thrown over his eyes.

Michael was the only person she had even known who could sleep at his own command. If he decided he needed a nap so he could stay up all night, he would just lie down and be out in a few minutes. It was just another of his extraordinary features. Except he always needed her to wake him up.

She stood over him, wishing he'd move his arm so she could see his face. Michael's face did something to her; she never got tired of looking at him.

You're a kid. Twelve years old and hopelessly in love? Anyone else would laugh in her face if she said it out loud. Michael would laugh in her face, but the laughter would be nervous because he'd know it was the truth. She couldn't help it. Michael was the only one, the only one she had ever found, maybe the only one in the world. All her life she had hoped to find someone like him. She had been afraid for a long time that perhaps no one like him existed, or even if one did, the person might not want her.

Michael rolled over, putting his back to her. She tensed, but he was deeply asleep, unaware of her. She wanted to lie down next to him, just to be near him — but if she did, she wouldn't be able to resist touching him, and she knew what would happen then. He wouldn't have it; he was very firm. *No funny stuff.*

Would it have been any worse if he'd been, say, a married bank teller with three kids? She probably wouldn't have been able to get near him then. If he'd been a woman — well, that would have been completely different. Some nice woman, who would maybe have liked being kind of a mother or older sister to her. That would have been best of all. But Michael was what she had.

Michael. She mouthed his name. *Roll over facing me.* Without really

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meaning to, she pushed out a little, and he obeyed in his sleep. His expression was peaceful, all his concerns set aside while he rejuvenated himself for the evening's game. She could see his eyeballs moving back and forth behind the lids. Dreaming. *Michael,* she implored silently, *share your dreams with me.* Because she had already pushed out once, she couldn't stop herself from doing it again. Her eyes closed, and she had the sensation of drifting downward through still air, floating toward a region of fog and shadow. As she sank closer to it, it began to take on dark colors and there was a flickering of something like heat lightning playing in clouds.

Then she was with him. A jumble of images like animated balloons assailed her: Michael broke, Michael flush, Michael humiliated in school for some petty sin against classroom protocol. Michael meeting her for the first time in the laundromat. Michael and a woman — she turned away from that one. Michael when she had tried to touch him. When he hit her. Michael discovering she was telling him the truth—

O.K., little sister, if you can really do that, tell me what that guy over there is thinking. Standing on a sidewalk near a diner, Michael jerked his head at a man holding a flat paper bag under one arm while he waited for the light to change so he could cross the street.

He's thinking when is the goddamn light going to change.

Michael laughed at her. *Brilliant, Sherlock. I'm no mind reader and I could have guessed that.*

She stared up at him evenly. *I wasn't finished.* And then she gave it to him, not orally but direct, right between the eyes. He's-thinking-I-wonder-when-this-goddamn-light-is-gonna-change-I-wanna-get-back-to-the-office-nobody-there-now-lunch-get-some-peace-piece-magazine-nice-one-all-women-crawling-all-over-each-other-oily-women-tongues-skin-oily-hard-oh—

Michael froze, unable to move while she gave it all to him, dictating the man's thoughts while he waited for the goddamn light to change. Then the light did change, and he was striding across the street quickly, swinging his arms, the small brown paper bag in his right hand moving like a pendulum.

Where's he going? Michael asked.

Back to his office.

Where's that?

I don't know.

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You don't know?!

I can hear only what people are actively thinking about. I can't get into their minds. They can't receive me. Nobody can. But you.

He didn't give her time to tell him how lonely she had been, how she had run away from home six weeks before, how hollowly she had profited from the ability, and how she had tried to give up using it and couldn't. But he took her back to his place, one room in a shabby building called the Hotel Cosmo (By the Day, Week, or Month, In Advance).

Something stirred in his mind. She'd been in almost too long; if she stayed much longer, he would become aware of her and wake up. But she needed the contact. God, how she needed it. Michael knew that. He kept her on short rations, letting her in only for a few minutes. He didn't like her crawling around in his head; it was a dirty thing to him. Except when it was useful.

Like for the games.

They might have done anything else. At twelve, she knew more about people than anyone should have known at any age, and they might have done something grand, even if Michael insisted on keeping her out most of the time. Instead—

Her head filled with an unimaginably bright light, and she was whirling in sudden disorientation. There was a feeling of falling and acceleration, and it was as if she were plummeting past a thousand bulky objects, hitting each one of them—

When she opened her eyes, she was on the floor. Michael had hit her with the telephone book.

"What did I tell you, little sister?" He threw the slim volume at her. It bounced off her breastbone, and one sharp corner dug into her stomach. "Did I say no funny stuff or what?" He crouched over her, wrapping one hand in her hair. It was safe for him to touch her hair; hair was dead. "Did I tell you no funny stuff? Answer me!" He jerked her head back.

"Michael, I couldn't help it." Her voice came out in a high-pitched whisper. "You know I've got to have—"

"You can *wait*, you understand that, you can *wait* until later when *I* say!" He forced her to her feet and shoved her at the bed. Her hair was still tangled around his hand, and she cried out. He shoved her again, freeing himself from her roughly as she tumbled down onto the mattress. She got up, reaching for him, but he had the phone book again and he batted her hand away.

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"Michael—"

"Back! I mean it, girl, get back! I don't have to touch you to hit you!" He stepped forward, and she threw one arm up defensively. For a moment she thought he would strike her. Then he rolled the thin directory into a tight tube.

"O.K. Great. You just stay there on the bed and don't move." He ambled around the foot of the bed, watching her. She began to bring her arm down, and he swatted it. "I said, don't move!"

"No, Michael. O.K. I won't." Her eyes burned, wanting to fill with tears, but she wouldn't let them come. If she could just touch him, it would stop. The contact was instantaneous if they were physically touching, but Michael was careful about that because she could paralyze him with it.

"Did I warn you about the funny stuff? Answer me!"

"Yes, Michael, you warned me."

"But you did it anyway. Why?"

"I couldn't help it—"

"You *can* help it!" He slammed the phone book down on the bed inches from her other hand. "You *can* help it; you've got the control, and we both know it. You can keep from listening in on me or anyone else. *Why* did you do what I told you not to?"

Her throat seemed to be twisted as tightly as the phone directory in Michael's hands. "I wanted to—" Tears filled her eyes after all and overflowed. "I'm so lonely; you don't know—"

He slammed the directory down on the bed in front of her, nearly grazing her cheek. "Don't you ever," he said, low and gravelly and dangerous, "don't you ever come inside me without I tell you to again. Don't you *ever. Don't you ever* — because I swear I'll really hurt you bad. And you'll never see me again. Now, you think you can remember that?"

She nodded.

"You'll be goddamn lucky if I let you in tonight after the game. That's when you get yours, girlie, when *I* let you in. I can keep you out; you know I can. And I still might do that."

"Please," she whispered.

"Shut up. You better do right tonight, little sister. You better be on your best all night, because if you're not, I might decide I like my old scams better. Are you taking this in?"

"Yes, Michael. Can I put my arm down?"

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He stepped back. "Get out."

She scuttled across the bed, watching him warily, and backed toward the door. "I — I need some money, Michael."

He threw a crumpled ten-dollar bill at her. "Get your skinny ass *out*."

Moving quickly, she crouched to pick the money up off the carpet, still keeping her wide eyes on him.

"Little sister."

She paused halfway out of the room, holding the door in front of her like a shield.

"Be back here to wake me up at 6:30, or don't bother coming back."

She dipped her head in a nod and slipped out into the hall.

She spent nearly an hour in the tacky gift shop off the lobby, drifting among the shelves while the clerk behind the counter tried to decide whether she was a shoplifter, and wondered why, on his salary, he should have cared.

Out of boredom, she bought a *Vogue* magazine and a small bag of pistachio nuts with her crumpled ten-dollar bill and went out to the patio near the pool to sit at one of the umbrella tables. There weren't many people around, and she was left to herself to methodically pry each nut open with her teeth and suck the meat out, staining her fingertips and mouth magenta while she stared at fierce-faced models cavorting in unlikely places in even unlikelier clothes. The pistachio shells made an untidy little pile on the metal table, and the wind threatened to scatter them. Deliberately, she held herself tight and would not tune in on the few people who walked by and gave her curious glances. She didn't want to know what they were thinking; she didn't want to know what anyone was thinking ever again. She might be better off if she just walked away from the hotel, let Michael sleep until he woke up, whenever that would be, and tried to forget about him. Her own parents didn't want her back, but maybe she could find a family to take her in. She could try to live like regular people, suppress the ability (she had never called it a gift), and maybe it would atrophy and disappear.

A woman advertising purple lipstick offered her a kiss from a glossy page. She turned it over, working a pistachio nut open on her bottom teeth. She might as well try to alter the basic rhythm of her heart or glue her eyes permanently shut as attempt to give up using the ability. It was still useful, and having lived with it, she could not live without it.

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Live without Michael? Go back to the way things had been before, having no one to get close to in the special way she needed? No one to provide the complement to the ability, to receive her, bind with her in a union that transcended the separateness of two minds in two bodies—

But Michael would never let things go quite that far with them. He opened up to her only so much, but when he felt the start of the process that would have melded them together, he forced her out again.

In the beginning she tried to convince him it was the right thing to let the process continue to its conclusion. *Don't you see, Michael? It's supposed to be that way. Maybe we're not really two people — maybe we're one person who came apart somehow—*

But he didn't want to hear about that. If she didn't know who she was, *he* knew who *he* was — and he wasn't half a man and half a twelve-year-old girl. If she didn't like the way things were, she could walk; he wouldn't stop her.

Whether he actually would let go of his meal ticket, she didn't know. He managed to keep a lot of his motivations hidden from her, even when she was inside him. Sometimes she thought if she ran away, he would come after her; other times, she was afraid he'd carry through on his threat to leave her.

And in the meantime they were getting closer, whether Michael liked it or not. Every time he let her in, even just a little bit during the games or afterward, they drew that much closer. Someday he would have to let her all the way in. Either that or never let her in again.

She looked at her reddened fingers and tried to wipe them on her shirttail. The stain would have to wear off. She wished Michael would wear off, that he would somehow lose his capacity to receive her. There wouldn't be anything she could do if he just lost it. Then she wouldn't feel so desperately drawn to him; her compulsive, helpless love would fade, and she could search for someone else. And if there wasn't anyone else, she wouldn't be any worse than she'd been before she found him. Would she?

The last pistachio nut in the bag refused to open. She held it up to examine it. The shell was perfectly smooth all over, with no hint of an opening or even a seam where she could split it open. Licking her stained lips, she put the nut between her back molars and bit down, crushing both the shell and the meat inside to pulp.

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She stayed by the pool, looking through the *Vogue* over and over again until it was time to go upstairs and wake Michael. He said little to her beyond telling her to change her clothes, but his anger seemed to have passed. She kept thumbing through the magazine while he showered, and when they went down to the dining room, she carried it with her without thinking about it.

"Why'd you bring that?" Michael said after they were seated in a corner booth.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know."

"It's not exactly bright enough for reading in here. All this candlelight crap." He looked around the dim, almost full dining room. "Mr. and Mrs. America, getting away for a weekend from the kids they wish they'd never had. Isn't that right, little sister?"

"I don't know," she said again.

"You don't know?" He had a sip of beer. "Don't tell me you've been wandering around loose all afternoon and you didn't listen in on anybody?"

"I didn't feel like it."

"You just read a magazine and ate those whatchamacallit nuts."

"Pistachio." She looked down at her lap.

"You look like hell. You got red all over your mouth. What's the matter with you? Girls your age are supposed to be all uptight about how they look, and you go around like that." He blew out his breath disgustedly. "*Vogue* magazine, for crying out loud. I give you money for clothes, and you go to the Salvation Army and come home with somebody's old rag they don't want anymore."

She didn't look up. She couldn't tell him she went to the charity stores because the thoughts of the people who worked in those places were usually warm and comforting and permeated by something that lay in the gray area between kindness and love. Not like the thoughts of the people she met with Michael.

"All right, so what do you want to eat? You ain't even looked at the menu."

"A cheeseburger."

"A cheeseburger. Jesus. Come on, eat something real for a change. A cheeseburger. We're in a nice place here."

"I want a cheeseburger," she said firmly.

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"A cheeseb— have a steak."

She shook her head. This was Michael trying to be nice to her now, except he didn't really know how. She had to clench her teeth to keep from pushing out to him, to taste his mind and his self and show him how to love.

"You're having a steak. You gotta eat good stuff if you're going to keep your strength up. And coffee. I don't want you falling asleep on me tonight. I probably should have made you take a nap."

"I can't sleep during the day."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He made a disgusted noise. "You won't do this and you can't do that and you don't like to do the other thing. You're a major pain in the ass, Sarah Jane. You can't appreciate a goddamn thing I do for you. If it weren't for me, you'd still be camping out in laundromats and parking garages, eating whatever you could steal. And you wouldn't have anybody for that funny stuff you're so hot to do. And what do *I* get for it? A big long face and crazy questions about can we get married. Cut me a break, little sister."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked miserably, twisting the ends of her hair around her fingers.

Michael leaned forward with a nasty grin. "Tell me what's going on with those two over there." He jerked his head to her left. She turned to look and saw a middle-aged couple at another table. They were scowling down at their place settings, not looking or speaking to each other.

"What about them?"

"Tell me what's eating them."

And this, she thought, was Michael offering to let her back into his good graces. She sighed. "They're just a couple of married people here for the weekend."

"Yeah, but look at them. I mean, take a good look at them. Listen in."

She made a pained face.

"Listen in, and maybe I'll let you stay in longer than usual after the game tonight."

"You always say that, but you don't mean it."

"Don't give me a hard time, little sister." His smile was flat and counterfeit. "The harder you make it on me, the harder I can make it on you."

She didn't answer.

"Come on. Call it practice for later."

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Thoughts from several different people were jumbling together in her mind.

"I don't need to practice."

"Are you gonna keep pushing it?" Michael leaned forward. "What do you care if we know what they're thinking? They won't know it. Come on."

Her eyes narrowed. Michael watched her eagerly. He was expecting her to tell him out loud. She waited several seconds until she saw a hint of impatience in his face, and then sent a stream of thought at him, directly instead of speaking.— *telephone-call-from-the-sitter-one-of-the-kids-is-sick-she-wants-to-check-out-and-go-home-and-he-doesn't-and—*

Michael fell against the padded back of the booth, shutting himself off from her. His face reddened with the effort. She had a sudden feeling that if she had persisted, she could have forced her way through his barrier and stayed inside him whether he liked it or not. But she let him break the contact.

"You little—" Michael sat up straight and pointed a finger at her. "I oughta—"

"Sorry," she said coolly. "Just practicing for tonight."

He reached for his beer. "You just better do me right, little sister. You just better."

"I will." She looked over at the couple again. They were still staring unhappily at the table. She actually had no idea what their problem was; she had just made the whole thing up.

She insisted on buying another bag of pistachio nuts before she and Michael drove across town to a dark, run-down neighborhood and a bar that seemed to be nothing more than a hole in the wall. Michael parked the car on the street and told her to wait in it with the doors locked and the windows rolled up while he went in. A minute later he came out and took her around the corner to a side entrance.

"They run the game in the storeroom," he told her. But she was already listening, thoughts from several different people jumbling together in her mind. She followed Michael through a dim hallway and into a small room full of boxes and crates. Under a bare, hanging bulb, a round table had been set up and four men were already seated at it. Cigar and cigarette

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smoke slithered in the air over their heads. They looked up from their cards, and one of them, a sandy-haired man with a florid complexion, said, "You're late, Mr., ah, Jones." Then all the men caught sight of her.

"What the hell is this?" asked the sandy-haired man. "You think this is some kinda tea party we're having here?"

Michael spread his hands. "Hey, what can I do? At the last minute my sister comes over and dumps the kid on my doorstep. She's going to the Ozarks for a week with her boyfriend, and somebody's got to keep an eye on Sarah Jane." Michael looked around at the stony faces of the men. Standing behind him, she clutched the *Vogue* and the bag of pistachios to her chest. The men's thoughts jabbered like an open telephone switchboard. *Guy's crazy what the hell does he think bring a kid here busted we all take a fall how old is she,* and then Michael cutting through everything: *Do they believe me, Sarah Jane! Answer me! Are they buying it!*

She trembled. *They think you're nuts bringing me here.*

Michael seemed to relax. "Hey, you guys. Really. What could I do?"

The sandy-haired man walked around Michael to have a look at her. She hunched her shoulders and tried to make herself smaller. "Thought you were new in town," he said to Michael, but staring at her.

"I am. But my sister lives here. Moved here with her boyfriend."

"Kid looks old enough to stay home alone."

"Yeah, but she's afraid to," Michael said, and shrugged. "She's kind of a big baby, you know what I mean?"

The man gave Michael a disgusted look. *Sleazeball scumbag dragging a kid to a place like this some people no decency—*

She couldn't help smiling.

"Something funny?" the man asked her.

She put her hand to her mouth as Michael turned to look at her. "Sarah Jane's kinda, hey, you know. Sometimes she smiles at nothing; sometimes she laughs. You know?"

"So what are you saying here? Is she gonna create a disturbance or something?"

"Nah, nah, she's O.K. She'll be real quiet, won't make a sound. She can sit on those boxes over there, look at her magazine, eat her nuts; she won't bother anyone. Right, Sarah Jane? You won't bother your Uncle Mike while he plays cards with his friends, will you, honey?"

She gave him a moron's stare with her mouth hanging open before she

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wandered over to some boxes against the far wall and sat down. The men's thoughts babbled as their eyes followed her. *—a hundred pounds stripped crazy or dumb call my kid tomorrow throw him out and her too Christ are we baby-sitters or what no meat on her big girl—*

"She reads magazines?" the sandy-haired man said to Michael suspiciously.

"She looks at the pictures, big deal. Look, you don't want me here, fine, I'm out. But I came a long way for a good game, and I got friends in this town. They like me to have a good time."

The man gave a sharp little laugh. "So take a seat; who's stopping you?"

Michael looked at her and nodded almost imperceptibly before seating himself at the table. Now it began, the worst part of living with Michael. She tore open the bag of pistachios, pretending to be absorbed in the pictures of the improbable models. She knew them all by heart now. The men's thoughts rumbled and churned in her head under the sound of the cards being shuffled, and she began sorting them out. The man to Michael's right was some kind of repairman; he didn't trust Michael, didn't like him, and wished he hadn't come. His thoughts were like heavy, persistent drumbeats. The man next to him had trouble concentrating. Memories of insignificant things constantly rolled through his thoughts, interrupting them or enhancing them as though he couldn't stop free-associating. He cared the least about Michael having brought her, but she recognized him as the one who was going to call his kid the next day. Now he was thinking about food.

The man with his back to her didn't like the idea of her sitting directly behind him. It meant he wouldn't know when she was looking at him. He was the one who kept wondering how old she was.

And the sandy-haired man with the red face. He showed flashes of concern for her, but it was the kind he had for dumb, not particularly useful animals: don't hurt them, but keep them well out of the way.

The circle came back to Michael, who was grinning at the cards piling up in front of him. The harsh overhead light threw strange shadows onto his face. She put a pistachio nut to her mouth and pushed out, touching Michael's mind.

Let's go, little sister. What's the story?

She sighed. A thousand ways they could have used their respective abilities, and Michael insisted on using them to cheat at poker. She

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directed her attention around the table, listening in as each man evaluated his hand, and then dutifully reporting to Michael.

Three nines; pair of eights and possible straight, seven low, ten high; one seven and possible straight, ace through four; pair of fives and an ace, queen, jack. Michael had taught her everything, coaching her over and over until she sounded to herself like she thought a Vegas croupier must sound. Michael's own hand had only a pair of threes. *So far, not so good,* she thought at him.

Just report on their cards, little sister.

She paid close attention as each player asked for one or two or three cards. Michael ended up with a pair of kings along with the pair of threes, but the three nines took the pot. Michael's disappointment oozed through her like the taste of something rancid.

See, Michael! Even cheating can't help sometimes.

Just you do what you're supposed to do and let me play. I'm getting the feel of them.

Miraculously during the third hand, Michael was dealt a straight, seven through jack. He stood pat while the others took two or three cards from the sandy-haired man — Harvey, they were calling him — and then began to bet. Michael's triumph thrummed in her, making her hand shake as she reached into the bag for another pistachio. The money in the center of the table increased.

This is ideal, little sister. They'll believe every bluff I lay on them from now on.

She squirmed. *The heavy man across from you doesn't believe you have anything, Michael. He doesn't trust you. He thinks you're cheating.*

Chill out, little sister, and let me play it.

Agitated, she cracked a nut between her teeth. The heavy man who thought Michael was cheating twisted around to glare at her.

"Does she have to do that? It's driving me bugfuck!" He turned to Michael, but his anger pounded incoherently in her mind like a jackhammer; she passed that on to Michael. His mouth twisted down at the corners.

"Knock it off, Sarah Jane. No more nuts. We can't concentrate here."

She set the bag quietly aside and listened as the betting continued. The angry man held a pair of kings; the rest of the hands were cold. Only Harvey attempted to stay in for a while. Then he, too, folded his cards and

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sat back to observe the duel between Michael and the man opposite. Sarah Jane's head began to throb.

"Ten bucks," said the man.

"See you and raise you another five." *Bluff his ass out of the water. How far will he go, Sarah Jane!*

He's thinking about cutting your throat.

That's why they call it cutthroat, babe.

For real, Michael. With a knife.

The man — Klemmer was the name he identified with, not Albert, which was his first name — folded his five-dollar bill in half the long way and then set it like a tent on top of the other bills. "Call," he said.

"You first," Michael told him.

The man wagged his graying head from side to side. "I paid for 'em; I get to see 'em."

Don't show off, Michael, she begged. But he laid his cards down showily, one at a time in descending order, until he came to the seven. He appeared to hesitate, and then put it on the table facedown.

"How much you bet it's a seven, Klemmer?"

A jolt of terror almost loosened Sarah Jane's bowels. *You're not supposed to know his name, Michael! He never told you!*

Michael smiled defiantly at the man, whose thoughts had flattened into a low hum of suspicion. But mercifully, he hadn't noticed Michael's use of his name.

It's too early to pull this, Michael! Stop it!

"How much?" Michael prodded.

The other man was about to answer — *twenty* — when Harvey leaned forward and turned the seven over. Michael's thoughts flared angrily, but before he could say anything, the sandy-haired man just laughed.

"You even had me going there for a while, Slick, but I knew that had to be a seven. Forget it; the pot's big enough for anyone. Right?"

Michaels' anger died; he picked his winnings up bill by bill. "Yeah. Sure. Big enough for anyone. I play sincere poker."

Don't be a big shot, Michael. That man saved you.

Lay off, little sister. They'd take me for everything in a minute if they could.

You're the stranger; they don't trust you!

"Hey, Sarah Jane," Michael said aloud. "Go ahead. Have a few nuts.

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We concentrate just fine, don't we?"

The heavy man's anger seared her mind and brought tears to her eyes. She sat with her head bent, pretending to be in a light doze.

Michael's cards went dead for the next few hands, but the tension between him and the heavy man increased steadily. The sandy-haired man, Harvey, kept watching him, undecided as to whether Michael was honest.

Sarah Jane felt herself settle into a weird calm. Michael bought the table a round of beer, brought in to them by a fat, bored bartender whose mind seemed to be on automatic pilot. The sight of her stirred no new thoughts, as though she were just a blurry photograph to him.

The game continued, the cards running cold almost without a break. Someone produced a new deck, which was examined and pronounced acceptable. It didn't do any of them much good. She ceased to pay attention to anything except the contents of each man's hand, reporting the information mechanically to Michael. Sometimes it helped, sometimes not. The heavy man's anger had subsided but remained ready. The others were nondescript in her mind, colorless entities who neither lost nor won large amounts of money, players Michael referred to as chair warmers, there only to fill out the pot.

The time crawled past, leaving her with a feeling of weighty exhaustion. The smoke in the air turned her stomach and hurt her eyes. In front of Michael the pile of money increased and then decreased, but he continued to run ahead, consulting her as though she were just another part of his mind. And she seemed to be just that. In her inner eye she could see the cards he held; she could taste the alcoholic maltiness of beer in his mouth, feel the air going in and out of his lungs. She slid in farther, wincing at the ache in his back and the hardness of the chair. Michael's gaze flickered to her, and she saw herself sitting on the boxes with her head bowed and her hair hanging down. Then she was all the way inside him, and she saw her body go limp. There was a roaring in her/Michael's ears and the sensation of something about to give way. She began to topple over.

"Sarah Jane!"

The faces of the other men flashed before her dizzyingly, and then the floor was rushing at her.

Moments later she was blinking up at Michael, who was bending over her, his face white with fury.

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"I'd say it's past your little mascot's bedtime," said the sandy-haired man. "Either that or she's pitching a fit. Which is it?"

"Get up," Michael growled at her, "and don't pull that shit again, Sarah Jane."

"Being a little hard on her, aren't you?" said the heavy man sarcastically.

Michael looked at him. "What's it to you? She's just a dumb kid."

"Yeah. Sure. Your sister's kid, right?"

Sarah Jane sat up with her back against the boxes. *Michael, let's get out of here.*

"That's what I said." Michael straightened up slowly. "What about it?"

Michael, please! Something's going to happen!

"She always faint when you're about to lose big?"

"What are you trying to say?" Michael asked.

"What is it you got going, some kind of signaling system maybe?"

"Hey, come on—," said the sandy-haired man, stepping forward, but the heavy man shoved him back.

Michael, we have to run. Now!

"Yeah, that's what it is, isn't it? Your little mascot signals you, and you signal back what you've got, right?"

"Bullshit in a bag, man; she's been sitting right over here on these boxes all night, reading her goddamn magazine and eating her nuts."

"Eating *my* nuts, pal, looking over my shoulder and telling you what I got!"

Sarah Jane pushed away from them, crawling toward the corner.

"She can't see what you got from where she's sitting," Michael said. "And she sure as hell couldn't see what the other guys were holding. You're crazy."

"Don't call me that, buddy."

Michael sneered at him. "Oh, *sorry*, Klemmer."

Michael, don't! I told you, you're not supposed to know his name! Sarah Jane thought at him just as he turned to her and yelled, "Will you shut up, you little bitch!"

The men looked at Sarah Jane and then at Michael. "You're the one who's crazy," said the sandy-haired man to Michael. "The kid hasn't said a word."

"It's their signaling system!" said Klemmer furiously. "That's how she talks to him without saying a word! Isn't it, little girl?" He lunged for

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her, but the other two men caught him and held him back.

"Hey, come on, now," said one of them, the man who was going to call his kid. "You don't want to hurt her."

"I wanna *kill* her!" said the heavy man. "I'm down three bills because of her!"

"Forget it; she's just a kid," said the sandy-haired man. "Who knows where he got her? I bet if we let her out right now, we'd probably never see her again. Would we, kid?"

Michael looked around at the men just as the sandy-haired man took hold of his upper arm. *Sarah Jane! What's going on! They can't believe that shit, can they! Sarah Jane! Answer me, goddamnit!*

Sarah Jane pulled herself up and stood facing them all with her arms clutching herself. *It's too late, Michael. I tried to warn you. They know there's something going on; they just don't know what. But they don't like you because you were winning all their money, and now—*

The sandy-haired man jerked his head at the door. "Get out. And keep going."

She opened her mouth to say something.

"I mean *now*, kid!" said the sandy-haired man. "Beat it. And don't ever come around here again."

"What are you going to do?" Michael said as she backed around the table. "Hey, come on, we weren't cheating—"

"'We' weren't, huh?" said the heavy man. "Sure, buddy."

Oh Michael—

Get the cops, Sarah Jane. Go get them right now!

"Out!" yelled the sandy-haired man, and she fled out the door into the hallway.

"Hey, Klemmer, Harvey, come on—," came Michael's voice through the door.

"and how the hell do you know our names?" the heavy man said. "We never told you our names!"

"Hey, come on, now," Michael said desperately. "You don't want to do anything—"

"We're just going to check your honesty a little," said the sandy-haired man. "Make sure it's still there."

The men's thoughts rose to an incoherent roar in her head, and over it all was Michael screaming to her to get help. Then the pain came, so

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white-hot and overpowering that she never heard the blows.

She was unable to think of anything except getting out of range of the agony pounding in her skull.

She came to herself crouched in an alleyway behind a trash dumpster, her forehead pressed against her knees. The awful noise in her mind had faded away a long time before, and something like general background babble had rushed in to fill the void. She had been resting open, like a microphone that had been left on and forgotten. Distant thoughts faded in and out of her mind, mixing together unintelligibly.

Slowly, she lifted her head, forcing the mind-babble down into silence. It was like trying to close an emormous, heavy steel door that had been stuck open. She concentrated, pressing her own thoughts against the others, filling her mind with her own awareness until there wasn't room for anything else.

Peace. For a few moments. And then she remembered Michael.

Michael!

For the first time in months, there was no answer.

She stood up unsteadily and found her way around the dumpster to the mouth of the alley. The street was unfamiliar, dingy under the yellowish streetlamps. She had no idea where she was in relation to the bar or the hotel, and she couldn't feel Michael at all. Feeling suddenly weary and light all at once, she leaned against a brick-walled building and looked up at the night sky. This was it. She was free. She hadn't been out of range of Michael since she'd found him, and now she was. She could go now if she wanted to, just go, and not look back.

And then it came, so faintly she almost thought she was imagining it: *Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane. . . .*

She wiped her hands over her face. No, she could never be out of range of Michael. Not while he lived.

They had tossed him out of a car into the shadow of an abandoned warehouse on the other side of the freeway, perhaps a mile away from where she'd come to. She found him without any awareness of where she was going, only that she was going to him. Weak at first, his thoughts grew stronger as they hooked onto her, drawing her to him. The pain was curiously remote to her; she could feel it, but she could keep it fenced off

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so it wouldn't take her over. She could also feel Michael's relief and joy at having found her, but that, too, was fenced off with the pain. It was peculiar. She'd never done that before with Michael.

Sarah Jane.

He was lying on the broken pavement of what had once been a parking lot. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see the gleam of blood in the faint light of a streetlamp a block away. She got it from him all at once: they had not intended to kill him, just to beat him badly, teach him a lesson. Except they'd beaten him too badly, and he was dying after all.

Won't they freak when they hear about it on the news, how my body was found here. They'll shit their frigging pants over it.

She crouched down a few feet away from his head, still not looking at him. *Yeah, Michael. They'll freak. They'll shit their frigging pants.*

And they'll be worried about you, Sarah Jane. They'll be afraid you'll go to the cops about it.

Yeah, Michael. They sure will.

So we'll have to hide for a while. And then, when they think they're secure, we'll go to the cops and nail their asses.

Her mind stopped cold for a moment. *We?*

Yeah. We. You and me, Sarah Jane. The way you always wanted it.

But you—

And then she saw what he meant to do as clearly as a movie in her head. She could even see him as though in a waking dream, standing before her with his arms open, ready to catch her up in a big, never-ending hug.

Come to me now, Sarah Jane. It's the only way. You can save me, and I'll be with you for good, the way you always wanted me to be with you.

She flet herself moving toward him in her mind.

Just reach down and put your hand on my head, Sarah Jane. Just touch me. You were always wanting to touch me. Touch me now, Sarah Jane. I know you still want to.

She could see it — Michael wrapping himself around her, stepping out of the painful, dying body on the ground and into her young one, living with her, melding with her the way she had known he would have to someday. Either meld or — not.

Come on, Sarah Jane. Touch me and we'll have it made. I'm not strong enough to come to you now; you have to bring me in. Save me, Sarah Jane;

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save me for yourself. Remember what you said about how maybe we weren't really two people but one that got split up somehow! That's the way it'll be for us, for always, if you'll just touch me now.

Her hand trembled in the air. Horrified, she snatched it back and pressed it to her chest. In her mind, Michael's image receded a little.

Sarah Jane! Underneath his hurt and confusion, she could sense the undertone of the old anger. *What's the matter!*

You are, Michael, she thought wearily. *How can we be sure you'd come into me and I wouldn't come into you instead and die with you!*

He didn't even hesitate. *Because you're the one with the power, Sarah Jane — the real power. I was always just your receiver. Right! You've got the power. You can keep us both alive.*

He was reaching for her now with his last bit of strength. She imagined the fence that kept out his pain growing up higher between them. Chicken wire, she imagined, like so many fences she'd seen. Chicken wire and barbed wire.

Sarah Jane! What are you doing!

I can't, Michael.

Can't what!

Can't take you.

You always wanted this!

When you were alive. The fence thickened, chicken wire crisscrossing barbed wire; he was disappearing behind the snarls. *When there was no alternative.*

There's no alternative now!

Not for you.

The fence shut him completely out of sight. *Sarah Jane! I thought you loved me!*

I love you, Michael, she thought miserably. *But I don't want to be you.*

His thoughts became a howl of outrage and betrayal. *I'll haunt you, little sister, if I can find a way. I swear I'll come after you; I swear I'll get you. You'll be cursed all your life, and I'll be waiting for you when you die—*

The most amazing thing, she thought, was that he'd called her *little sister* at the end instead of something like *you bitch.*

She didn't take much from the hotel room, just one small bag of clothes

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and Michael's emergency stash of money. The clerk sitting alone at the desk in the lobby gave her an odd look as she passed him on the way in and on the way out again. The lateness of the hour. It was so late even the little store was closed. No more fashion magazines or pistachio nuts tonight.

Amazingly, she found a cab sitting a little ways from the hotel entrance, the driver dozing behind the wheel. She got in and told him to take her to the airport, ignoring his sleepy curiosity about her. There was enough cash to get her a one-way ticket to the Coast. After that — well, there was the ability. She'd be able to listen in so she'd know when she could lift an unguarded purse or a few small food items. She'd get by. She'd done it before.

It was a long ride to the airport. She sat back and let her mind drift. She hadn't even felt him die. So strange; she'd have thought she'd have felt something that marked the ending of Michael's life, but there'd been nothing. Was that all there was to it?

"Huh? What'd you say?"

Sarah Jane sat up with a start. "What?"

"Did you just say something to me?" asked the cabdriver.

She swallowed, forcing herself to breathe normally. "No. I didn't say a word. Nothing."

"Oh. Musta been the radio I heard."

She sat back again and smiled. "Yeah. It must have been."

The man picked up the microphone and murmured something in cabdriver to it. "So, what's a young girl like you doing going to the airport so late at night?" he asked as he put the microphone back in its holder.

"I'm going home," she said. "Death in the family."

"Oh," the cabdriver said. She let his thoughts ramble lazily through her mind. He was wondering what she could have been doing here, and families today, Jesus, how could they let their kids go traveling by themselves, didn't they know awful things could happen, especially to the really sweet ones, didn't they care. . . .

And then, without warning, she was in.

The contact lasted barely half a second, but it was dizzying: his name was Tom Cheney, and he had a wife and three sons; he was working long hours for the oldest boy's college tuition, and it wasn't the greatest life, but at least they all had a home to go to, and—

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Sarah Jane wrenched away from him, shaking. They rode a mile on the highway in silence, and then the cabdriver gave a long sigh. "Jeez, I'm tireder than I thought. After I drop you off, I better call it a night."

She sank against the seat cushions. Of course, he wouldn't know what it was. How could he? She wanted to laugh and cry with relief and dismay. Of all the crazy things, to find another receiver so soon after Michael—

Except he wasn't another receiver. She could tell by the aftertaste in her mind. He was just a normal person. It was her ability that had changed.

After all those months with Michael, pushing out to him, getting into him, it had been like exercising a muscle. It had strengthened the ability so that now she could make anyone her receiver.

Anyone.

"Huh? Did you just say something?" asked the cabdriver.

"No, I — no. I didn't."

"Damn. Sorry. I guess I must be going nuts or something, hearing voices."

"The radio," she said, smiling.

"No, it wasn't the radio," the man said, troubled. "It was real weird. I thought I heard someone say, 'Little sister.'"

Sarah Jane's smile faded. "'Little sister'?"

She wiped her hands over her face. "Did you — did you hear anything else?"

The man shrugged. "I dunno. Why? You hearin' the same voices or something?" He laughed. "You psychic?"

Sarah Jane hesitated. "I think everyone is. Just a little, I mean."

"I don't much believe in that stuff. My wife does, though. She reads her horoscope every day in the paper, says she knows when one of the kids is in some kinda trouble. Me, I figure that's part of being a good parent. Intuition, you know. Say, what about your parents? They must be nuts, letting you run around in the middle of the night so far from home."

"They're O.K.," she said noncommittally. She pushed out with her mind. *Michael!*

Nothing. He could reach someone receiving her, but he wasn't quite strong enough to reach her. Yet. How long before he was?

It didn't matter, she decided. Because she would find someone before then, and together, they'd keep him out. Two live people would be stronger than one dead Michael.

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"Huh?" said the cabdriver. "I *swear* you said something that time."

"Like what?" she asked.

"I swear I heard you say, 'Better hurry.'"

"Oh," said Sarah Jane. "Yeah. I guess we should. I don't want to miss the last flight out. I want to find my family as fast as possible."

"Find them?"

"You know, at the airport."

"Oh yeah." The cab sped up slightly. "Don't worry , little sister. I'll get you there."

"You'll try," she muttered, but the cabdriver didn't hear her.

"Gordie's had a look under your hood, Mr. Holbrook, and this is what he found."

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Long-time contributor Reg Bretnor always seems to come up with something new and delightful, such as this amusing tale about a wedding gift that has a most unwelcome effect on the honeymoon.

Wedding Present

By Reginald Bretnor

THE NEWS THAT Captain Jeremy Hobbs-Darlington was to marry Marjorie Bulmer, Major Bulmer's widow, came as a shock to the entire regiment (Hackett's Horse, ___th Cavalry, Bengal Lancers). Ever since the major had been killed pig sticking, every junior officer in the regiment had dreamed of possibly giving her a tumble when she returned from a mourning year in England to settle what there was of his estate. While her reputation was unblemished, she had flirted with the lot of them, and she really was — as old Colonel Mackletree put it — a devilish fine woman, always saying it in such a way that you knew exactly what he had in mind. She could not have come out at a better time, for Hobbs-Darlington had inherited a small estate in Yorkshire and had just sent in his resignation. He proposed immediately, and she accepted without hesitation. Each felt that they were made for each other. "My one regret, dear Jeremy," she said, "is that I can bring you next to nothing. My grandfather's dead set on male heirs, and my cousin — he's really just a second cousin —

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Holroyd has been working on him, reminding him that the major and I had no children and that he himself is engaged to one of those wretched Marston girls. So chances are, I'll scarcely be mentioned in the will."

Hobbs-Darlington told her quite truthfully that there was nothing further from his mind, that she was all that mattered.

The junior officers were disappointed; the married senior officers sighed and told their wives it was jolly nice for old Jeremy. But there was no resentment, no bitter envy. Everyone in the regiment — with one exception — liked Hobbs-Darlington. He was fair, courteous to all, strict when necessary, more than ordinarily handsome, and a splendid horseman. The native soldiery, from the risaldor major down to the newest sowar, worshiped him. Besides, he had a reputation throughout the Indian Army for being a thoroughly honorable, but prodigiously successful, ladies' man — a reputation very difficult to achieve.

The one fly in the ointment was the colonel, who had detested Hobbs-Darlington ever since he joined the regiment, and who had lusted after Marjorie since long before her husband's passing. The fact that he knew it to be hopeless just made it that much more galling.

Therefore, everyone — most of all Hobbs-Darlington himself — was absolutely astounded when the handsomest wedding present he received was from the colonel. It was an antique tulwar, its long, curved blade magnificently damascened and gold-inlaid, its scabbard of purple velvet with a golden chape and foot, its hilt of fine green Chinese jade — a present fit for a maharaja. It was wrapped in the finest of Kashmiri shawls, with a quaint note from the colonel, hoping that "this little gift, now that I'm really too old to enjoy it, may contribute to what I'm sure will be a long and happy marriage."

Hobbs-Darlington was deeply touched. "My dear," he told Marjorie when finally they were alone in the bridal suite, "I must say, I never expected anything like this. I always thought the old fiend hated me."

She laughed. "He does, Jeremy, he does. You'd best have a care. The thing may be poisoned. But now—" She moved toward him. "—now don't we have other things to think about?"

They embraced. They kissed. No matter what's now being said of late-Victorian Englishwomen, there was no false modesty about Majorie Hobbs-Darlington. She teased him; she made love to him in little ways that took him by surprise; she allowed him to enjoy the delicious process

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of undoing all those stays and hooks and eyes and ribbons and tiny buttons that, in those days, held a lovely lady pretty much together, and she helped him also in the much less complicated process of getting appropriately undressed. Finally, abruptly, they both stood there naked, Hobbs-Darlington staring in openmouthed admiration, Marjorie as wide-eyed as he.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "No wonder you're a lancer!"

They joined. He lifted her with a glad cry; carried her to the absolutely imperial bed; laid her on it gently; ran his hands, not quite so gently, down her thighs — and, with a horrible gasp, abruptly stopped.

Seated at the foot of the bed, in what is known as the lotus posture, was a young Indian woman. She wore a richly jeweled headdress, a jeweled silken cincture around her shapely hips, and nothing else.

"*What in God's name?*" he exclaimed.

"Huzoor, I am here to help you," she declared in Urdu, smiling sweetly. "I see you have a truly noble instrument — but, like most Englishmen, I very much doubt you know how to use it. Do not fear. I shall teach you. Think how pleased your lovely wife will be."

Hobbs-Darlington shuddered. Beside him, his lovely wife was sitting bolt upright on their bed, staring at him as if he had gone mad; and he himself, wearing an expression compounded of utter astonishment and horror, was staring at the very fetching creature who had spoken to him. So shocked was he that he scarcely noticed the splendor of her breasts, or the fact that she was slightly but definitely translucent.

"What are you *doing* here?" he cried out, also in Urdu. "Who *are* you?"

"*Huzoor*, I am an *apsaras*, a temple courtesan. It was my task in life to bring solace to pilgrims and to instruct young men in everything pertaining to my art, as it is now my pleasant task to instruct you."

"But — but—" Suddenly he became conscious of Marjorie tugging desperately at his elbow. He half turned his head.

"Hobbsie! Hobbsie darling! What in God's name are you doing? *What* are you talking to?"

Hobbs-Darlington pointed a trembling finger at the bed's far corner.

"Hobbsie! Jeremy! My dearest! There's nothing there."

He closed his eyes. With a great effort of will, he forced himself to realize that perhaps his entire marriage was at stake. He turned away from the *apsaras*, determined to ignore her, real or imaginary, and make proper

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love to his proper wife. He put his arms around her—

Good Lord, she thought, *the poor chap's as limp as a Bombay dishrag in the rainy season! What on earth hit him!*

Then suddenly she saw the light, or at least what she instantly took to be the light. After her five happy years of marriage to the major, she was quite sure that she understood men thoroughly, cavalry officers especially. Gently, she stroked his tense back. "Jeremy dear. You mustn't worry. You mustn't let this trouble you. Believe me, *I* understand. I know what sort of monastic lives so many of you lead: if it isn't pigs, it's polo — or tent pegging, or shooting tigers, or chasing those miserable wild natives on the frontier. Naturally, at first this — *this* must be terribly difficult—"

Hobbs-Darlington, his pride touched to the quick, emitted a dreadful choking sound. He forced himself to concentrate on the loveliness now more or less in his arms, and it is much to his credit that, one way or another, he finally did manage to do his duty, even though the Indian woman kept criticizing his technique in a soft voice while he did it, but to say that he fulfilled either his own expectations or Marjorie's would be very far from the truth.

When he had finished, the *apsaras* shook her head sadly. "Why are you afraid of me?" she asked. "Did the colonel sahib not tell you that I am married to that sword he gave you, that each of us, entering upon our dedication to the temple, is married either to a sword or to a god? I have served many a gentleman since my unfortunate death in Sir Eyre Coote's day. Yes, indeed. Such men as the Gaekwar of Baroda, Colonel James Skinner of Skinner's Horse — though *he* certainly needed little instruction — and even Lord Wellesley when he was fighting Tippu Sultan. And now *you* refuse to listen to me, and blunder with your fine equipment like some village boy."

A tear formed at the corner of her eye and rolled slowly down her cheek.

Hobbs-Darlington did not feel sorry for her. "Tomorrow—" He swore a mighty oath. "—that damned sword goes back!"

"It cannot!" she declared. "Please understand. I am married to that sword, and the sword was a wedding gift to you. Therefore, you are my lord and I must be your slave. That is why you alone can see and hear me."

"Damn Mackletree!" growled Hobbs-Darlington. "Damn his black soul to hell!"

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"What was that?" asked Marjorie, raising herself on an elbow.

"I was just muttering to myself in Urdu," he replied, certain that, except for a few words the servants used around the house, she probably knew nothing of the language.

It speaks well for Hobbs-Darlington's resolution and for Marjorie's tender patience that for three days and nights, they carried on as much as possible as if it were a normal honeymoon. Marjorie thought of consulting the regimental chaplain, or at least a doctor; many a time, Hobbs-Darlington wished he could confide in the wise old risaldor major. But the regiment was far away.

Their days were ruined by worry, their nights by the beautiful *apsaras*'s increasingly detailed, increasingly anatomical criticisms. The moment he thought he had succeeded in ignoring her and achieving a proper state of readiness, her *oohs* and *ahs* of admiration and her subsequent expressions of disappointment ruined everything. Finally flesh could stand no more —no pun intended.

Hobbs-Darlington faced the issue squarely. There was only one thing to do — tell Marjorie the whole story and hope that she'd believe it.

That very afternoon, as soon as they'd had luncheon, he carefully explained the whole thing to her. He told her what an *apsaras* was, and about the practice of marrying them either to a god or to a sword, and what Colonel Mackletree had done to him.

"Hmmm!" she murmured. "I've heard about those women, though I never could believe that they were at all as — well, as accomplished as they're said to have been. Do you really mean that they had to stay married to a silly sword even after they died?"

"Well, this one did, and now she says that because it was a wedding gift, I can't give it back."

"What a nasty beast the colonel is!" she exclaimed indignantly. "If there's anything that makes me believe the whole business, it's that *he* gave it to you — he never would have otherwise. Why, it even explains that little remark of his about 'now that he was too old really to enjoy it anymore.' I'm sure he used to. It's just what a dirty old man like that would slaver over. Ugh!"

"But whatever shall we *do*?" he asked her.

She took both his hands in hers. "My dear," she said. "We do love each

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other, so we can be patient for a while. We'll put it to good use. Do you remember my second cousin Holroyd, who I told you was certain to do me out of my inheritance? How in a month or two he plans to marry that awful Marston girl so that Grandfather'll think he may have a male heir?" She smiled at him. "We'll just hang on to that tulwar, and try to pretend your little girlfriend doesn't exist. After all, if the colonel could give it to you as a wedding present, why can't we give it to Cousin Holroyd? And we can give him lots of other stuff from India to confuse the issue."

She laughed softly. "Just think what fun he'll have! He doesn't understand a word of Urdu."

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This story is about the beginning and the end of a man's life. The middle seems to have been squeezed out somehow, yet thanks to the skill of Messrs. Dann and Malzberg, you'll receive a clear and painful vision in six short pages . . .

Blues and the Abstract Truth

By Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann

THIS ISN'T A spiritual or a prescription. It is, however, a precise diagnosis.

Bear with me. To explain and explain.

So this is how it happens: It's 1963, and you are with a girl named Mollie. John F. Kennedy was killed three weeks ago on the 22nd (you can look that up), and LBJ is telling us that we will continue . . . continue with what? "Danke Schön" and "Call Me Irresponsible" are playing day and night on the radio, God help us all. You went out to a college bar in Hempstead, Long Island, where they had a guy who played terrific jazz organ, and you picked up this girl who is a freshman at Hofstra and hails from upstate somewhere, maybe Cohoes. She says she was the *only* Jewish girl in her high school, and she makes every other word sound like "aou."

You've brought her back to your rented room on the second floor of Mr. Seitman's rooming house in East Meadow. You thought you'd have to

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sneak her into the house, but dictatorial, half-blind Mr. Seitman has gone out to play bingo, and now you're safely behind closed doors and impressing the hell out of Mollie with your knowledge of jazz. You're studying music at the same college she's attending (she's a theater major), and you are absolutely certain that one day your name will be listed in *Playboy*'s Annual Jazz Poll. And you're smart because you're studying musicology; worst comes to worst, you can teach during the day and play in the clubs all night. You have a 1-Y draft status because you have a nervous stomach, and right now you're playing the classic recording of Louis Armstrong's "A Monday Date," where he cuts in with a brilliant vocal rendition right after his trumpet solo.

Mollie has been saying something like she's a virgin and that she believes chastity to be the only valid option for a woman in these times, although she's not opposed to oral sex. Not *bitterly* opposed, anyway. In 1963, before and after JFK's extraordinary run of bad luck, it was very chic in college circles to be a virgin, even if you weren't, so this is not surprising or objectionable.

"Sure," you agree, understandingly. "Sure."

She looks like she has nice breasts under her skin-pink mohair sweater, and you are hopeful of seeing them naked soon, but (and this is the kicker) *you* are for sure the virgin in this crowd. You don't know how to tell her this or cover your inexperience.

Luckily, she knows that you want her, and senses your awkwardness, and she takes you off the hook easily by making the first move.

The important thing is, you are going to come.

Coming is definitely not a routine event in your life — with a woman, that is to say. You have been thinking about it all night. Now the black lights are on, and so is the rotating sparkle globe you've installed on the ceiling, and all your posters are glowing like neon: peace signs and astrological signs and all manner of fantastic beasts and Nereids are suddenly brought to radioactive life while the room seems to twirl with every possible color. You and Mollie are smoking some unbelievably good Panama Red, which a buddy from your band has left with you to stash, and Mollie's clothes are off — almost all of them, anyway — and you are so stoned-out now, the two of you, that you are confusing the music with your thoughts, but you're getting it right, sliding your fingers over her goosebumped skin, pushing and grinding against her, tasting her cigarette-

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soured mouth, thinking musically of this and that and nothing at all and that poor bastard JFK, fucked over now by a Texan, and then you are

Transformed.

You are taken up and out, Stony-o, you are lifted like the bullets lifted JFK in the Continental, you are *yanked*, and then. . . .

You are bearing with me. I am doing what I can to explain. Over and over this goes, but it is vitally important to get it right; there is no understanding without memory, Mollie, and I can still almost feel your arms tight around me, and your tongue, and then

You are somewhere else.

You are *here.*

You are in this *place.*

It's like being six sheets to the wind and falling down the stairs.

It's like being jolted out of a deep sleep.

But here you are, young man, no transition, yank, bang, and you're in a large office separated into cubicles. The pushpin fabric of the five-foot-high cubicle dividers is powder blue, the commercial-grade carpet a dismal brown. The dividers are on your right, and six people are crammed into the cubicles, one to a spot, phoning, until suddenly they all turn to look at you, staring at you, waiting for an explanation. You must have made *some* kind of squawking noise, and who can blame you, what with Mollie's face taking up the field of vision one minute, and now this. . . .

You look at these six people, and what you really want to say is, "What the fuck is going on here?" — but that would expose your position immediately. It's not for nothing that you have a little sixties smarts, a residue of late-fifties cunning. You still have a buzz on from the grass (maybe that pot was *too* good), and you say, keeping your cool, adjusting yourself to the situation, "Back to work, gang. I just got a shock from the computer."

The word just comes to you. *Computer.* In 1963 that was a tech-word like *astronaut* and *New Frontier*, but you somehow had access to it. Be that as it may, you're still new to all this, and as you look at your hands, you can tell you have aged. You are not twenty, that is for sure. (Would that you were!) The hands are solid and bear the heavy imprints of time, and you know, now you know, that if you raise your hand to your face, you will feel texture, wrinkles, a bristly stiff mustache.

Such is the rush of chronology. It is much more than a physical dislocation. Much has shifted.

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But under the circumstances, you are amazingly calm.

You have had all of this latter time to think about that, of course; your calm, your amalgamation, your *synchronicity* with the impossible. Because, of course, you are of two parts: there is the strangling, stunned part of you that has come *here*, and there is that distant and cold part with which you have just merged; it is that distant "you" that knows about computers and the precise function of this office, which is to sell the unneeded to the unloved under the guise of love and need.

You're selling entertainment.

This is a cable-television sales pit.

But the young, dislocated part of you asks how the fuck you got *here*, of all places. This is absolutely nowhere. You were supposed to become a goddamn musician. You should be out playing a gig at the Metropole or maybe The Half Note. At the very least, you should be teaching, maybe not at Juilliard, but a decent university wouldn't have been out of the question. You certainly shouldn't be managing six part-time temporaries working on a Friday night. And your distant, older part — the self you are quickly coming to know, the self that has been ground smooth as a stone by forty-two years of experience and frustration — doesn't have a word to say to you.

Because you know, Stony-o. You *know*.

A young woman of about twenty says, "Yeah, I've had that happen to me, too, when I'm putting stuff into the computer. Shocks the hell right out of you, doesn't it?" she says crudely, smiling. She is swarthy and doe-eyed, and it it obvious that her long shock of white-blonde hair is dyed, the ends burned by countless applications of bleach. The part of you with whom you have merged, the worn-out and cynical "you" who knows computers, understands that her name is Franny. She had been here for six months — a long time in the telemarketing game — and not so long ago you asked her to have lunch with you, but she said, "No married men; I've been through that door once, and that was enough." Another humiliation, even though *you* are the boss, even though you are supposed to be in control.

So now you know of this and other incidents of this man's life. Although everything is new and terrifying, now you *know* that twenty-odd years have passed and that you have merged with an older self, but whether it is really you or a defeated facsimile, you are not yet sure. There is still a tendril of hope in your heart. After all, this couldn't really have happened to *you*. But with dislocation comes instant maturity, and you really

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do know the truth, just as you know that it would be a kind of death to accept it completely.

Slow and tentative, fast and desperate, you have the answers. And yet you have none.

The buzz from the grass has ebbed — the yanking will do that to you — and you are very cold and very clear on a level of functioning that is so precise that it is the most terrifying thing yet. You are out of control, and yet you are *in* control. JFK, you understand, has been dead for half as long as he was alive, and Phil Spector is gone, gone.

"Come on, now," you say, cheerlessly enough, as you are in a supervisory position, "let's get back to *work*" — just as if you knew what you were doing here, as if you belonged (but you do! you do!) — and you go back to the computer. As one part of you gazed in wonder, the other part is monitoring the telemarketing service reps (you also know they're called TSR's) and at the same time typing names and addresses, answering *Y* or *N* to arcane questions coming up on the screen of the monitor, which reminds you of the fluorescent black-light posters in your room in East Meadow, the very same room where, moments before, you were kissing and tasting Mollie's lips, which were sticky and deliciously red from a recent application of strawberry lipstick gloss.

Well, that is how it began. Or how it ended.

OUTSIDE LOOKING in . . . inside looking out; my mantra.

One moment I'm twenty and trying to score; the next moment I'm forty-two and supervising cable sales in an upstate district that includes Mollie's hometown of Cohoes. I am married to a woman named Ellen Aimes, my first and only marriage, her second. We have been married for eighteen years and have one daughter, Mollie. (Through the insane coincidence of a malign but stupid fate, Mollie was the name of Ellen's mother.) We have careful sex once a week, always in bed and in a missionary position. Ellen is a mathematics teacher at a junior high school. I make about twenty-five thousand a year; she makes thirty. I drive a 1983 Pontiac Catalina and collect bebop and modern jazz, although I don't play any gigs, nor do we have instruments in the house. I don't need eight hundred pounds of piano to remind me of my failure. In the years since my . . . merging, return, amalgamation, whatever you wish to call it, I have had three adulterous involvements for a total of

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eight fornications, none of them particularly successful, all of them with younger co-workers. Ellen knows nothing of this, nor does she know that I was recently yanked out of my past and spilled into my future, all middle having been taken away from me.

But I know that if I were to tell this to anyone — anyone at all — I would be in severe trouble. Life would tremble. Life would topple. Life would become dangerous and ill-considered. I cannot manage this. I have bills to pay. I have a life — yes, a life — to lead. Mollie needs a father. She is eleven years old and is beginning to hate me in a healthy, bored sort of way.

How, I ask you, can I tell anyone of this? How, outside of this recollection, can I make my fate, my condition, clear?

Only this: Once I was twenty, and the shot that killed JFK somehow seemed to have catapulted me into my life; all the years outside looking in, and now I was going to be on the inside myself, and then, and then—

And then another shot, another catapult — and I am forty; married; a father; an unsuccessful adulterer (although perhaps I should count it a success that I haven't been caught); a panting, heavy, sad case of a man on the lip of middle age; and I now *am* on the inside looking out. Evicted and entrapped without a single moment, a single moment in the middle.

But I do have a facility for amalgamation. I could have just as easily lost it in the first moment of middle age, but instead, I interfaced with the future and saved it.

Interfaced. . . .

And I pick up a work order for a sale to a new subscriber in Cohoes (which precipitates all of this, you understand), and I just stare at it and stare at it.

Is that you, Mollie?

Is that you, I see, first name, middle name, new last name? Is that what I have made of you? A name and address on a sales card?

I'll never call you. It would be a disaster.

I will call you. It will be a disaster.

I'll never call you. It would be a disaster.

You think of calling her, don't you, Stony-o?

If you do — oh, you poor bastard — if you do, *will it take you back?*

Will it will it will it?

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It is hard to be optimistic about peace talks, summit conferences, arms control deals. The issues seem so complex and the participants bogged down in a swamp of suspicion, self interest and nationalistic politics. The history of peace meetings has been dismal, but what if one was arbitrated by some higher authority?

The Highest Authority of All

By Vance Aandahl

IT WAS A raw November morning in the Netherlands in the year 2004. A sharp wind blew steadily down from the north, sending before it desultory gusts of sleet. The president of the United States of America stepped out of his limo and shivered. Hunching his shoulders against the cold, he opened an umbrella and tipped it forward to protect his face. The six Secret Service agents who surrounded him were all doing the same — holding their umbrellas like shields as they leaned into the wind and started up the steps of Het Loo Palace.

Not exactly propitious weather for peace talks.

The president was inclined to look carefully at himself. As he climbed the wet marble steps of the venerable museum née royal country estate, he considered what he must look like in his black hat and heavy gray overcoat with a black umbrella clenched firmly in both hands, and he concluded with a smile of grim irony that it was *he* who looked like a dour old Russian bureaucrat, whereas his counterpart, the general secretary of

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the Communist party of the U.S.S.R. and president of the Supreme Soviet, the dashing Viktor Yusupov, was a handsome man still in his forties who might well show up in a Gore-Tex jogging suit. No matter what his attire, Yusupov could be counted on to project a youthful and congenial image for the media.

Still shivering, the president reached the top of the stairs. A door opened, and suddenly he and his bodyguard were out of the cold, enveloped in warmth and light and noisy voices as they moved down a corridor with anxious faces shouting questions at them from both sides while fotobeams beamed and holocams hummed busily away. The president shut it all out. He'd already put on his favorite press-conference expression, a wry smile that radiated optimism, courage, and wisdom. The people watching him on TV right now numbered in the billions worldwide. Not one of them knew he was really feeling intense despair, fear, and ignorance.

Another door opened. He was in a quiet little room now, some sort of dimly lit antechamber. Someone helped him close his dribbly umbrella and peel off his sodden overcoat. He and his translator stepped away from the Secret Service agents and walked through yet another doorway into a room filled with art treasures. One whole wall was covered with a huge tapestry depicting a pair of larger-than-life medieval noblemen hunting a fox with whippets. Many smaller masterpieces from the Middle Ages — paintings, statues, triptychs — adorned the other three walls. A small round table sat in the exact middle of the room with four ornately upholstered chairs placed carefully around it.

Yusupov and his translator stood on the far side of the table. Yusupov was wearing a red-and-green-checkered Pendleton lumberjack shirt and designer blue jeans. Truly a New Russian. He leaned forward, hands gripping the top of one of the chairs in a posture that appeared casual yet forthright, and he grinned in a manner calculated to seem friendly and good-natured.

The president walked forward and extended his hand. Yusupov reached across the table, and they engaged in a vigorous phony handshake.

"Good morning, Walter," said the Russian. "Or maybe not so good?" He laughed and gestured expansively toward a bay window. Pelted and streaked with raindrops, the windowpanes revealed that the weather outside was getting worse. Perhaps the temperature would drop and the sleet

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storm turn into a bona fide blizzard. Perfect conditions for a cold war. The president's low spirit sank lower.

"But why should we be carping about it the bad weather?" Yusupov laughed again — a hearty laugh with a hollow heart. "This time maybe we reach the agreement, eh?"

The president had to admit that Yusupov's English was getting pretty damn good. They'd probably need the translators only during the more technical parts of the peace talks. For nearly fifteen years now, Moscow TV programmers had relied heavily on outdated American shows from the eighties and nineties, and as a result there was a burgeoning new generation of young Russians who spoke American English well enough to consider themselves cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Grudgingly, the president acknowledged it was true — the Commies weren't the same old glum, distrustful, secretive bear-men of yore. In fact, if anyone looked like a bear, it was *he*, portly Walter Turner, gruff champion of the free world, a jowly, scowly old man all bundled up inside his conservative charcoal-gray wool suit like a bear inside his coat of fur.

Without a word, the president seated himself at the table. It was time to get down to brass tacks.

FOUR DAYS later, after nine long sessions with Yusupov — nine long sessions adding up to thirty-three endlessly repetitious hours of utterly futile attempts at negotiation — President Turner sat down in the same chair for one last try. Session number ten. It was pointless. As always, the Soviets had played a tough game of chess, and, for the umpteenth time in the past fifty years, a summit meeting was about to end in a bitter stalemate.

There was one small consolation for President Turner. The talks had taken their toll on Yusupov, too. The general secretary's facade of congeniality was eroding away. He sat slumped in his chair, his sandy Kennedy-cut hairmop badly tousled, dark pouches of skin sagging under his eyes. He glowered stubbornly across the table at the president. The two translators sat impassively off to the side, but when he looked at them closely, the president could see exhaustion and frustration in their eyes, too.

Yes, it was hopeless. Completely hopeless. The president decided he might as well say so.

"Let's face it, Viktor — we're wasting each other's time. We have more

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disagreements now than we did four days ago. We're still deadlocked on orbital lasers. You won't budge on Squirm missiles, and I won't budge on polar deep-ice testing."

"No," sighed Yusupov. "Not to mention our profound difference of opinion on the wording for the new bioweapons treaty, or the delicate question of what to do about Israel and the Sino-Australian Hegemony."

"To hell with it. I feel like slugging down a double shot of bourbon and calling it a day."

"For once, Walter, I agree with you." Yusupov uttered a raspy, humorless chuckle. "Except, I would prefer it a vodka on the rocks."

The translators said nothing. They knew when they weren't needed.

The president gazed irritably at the big tapestry. What was the point in hunting a fox, anyway? Did those Medici princes or whatever they were plan on eating it? Or making a pair of gloves out of its pelt? He shifted his gaze to the bay window. Ice covered the windowpanes, making it impossible to see the snowstorm outside. Cold-war weather. He turned his head and stared balefully down at the tabletop. His attaché case lay open, sheafs of balanced-power proposals spilling from it like the innards of some small animal they'd caught and gutted with a bone knife.

"The trouble with this whole summit meeting, Viktor, is the simple fact that you just won't listen to reason." The president lifted his head and glared at Yusupov. "We've offered you so damn many compromises—"

"Compromises? Do not joke me, Walter. Your 'compromises' involve only the least important issues. Never do you give an inch on things that matter."

"The things that matter? Tell me, Viktor — what *are* the things that matter? Do human rights matter? How about freedom?"

"Do not talk to me about freedom, Walter. Your country has gone bankrupt. Half the people in the U.S.A. are living in poverty. What sort of freedom is that?"

"I don't follow your logic, Viktor." The president felt his cheeks burn with anger. "The state of our economy has nothing to do with freedom or nuclear disarmament either one. If you'd confine your remarks to the problems we're supposed to be solving instead of bickering—"

"Bickering? *Bickering!*" Yusupov rose halfway out of his chair. "Walter — you're the one who's bickering!"

"It doesn't matter anyway," snarled the president. "Even if you weren't

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so goddamn stubborn, Viktor, even if you actually tried to cooperate a little, it wouldn't matter. These imbecilic peace talks were doomed from the start. Our problems are too complicated. They just can't be solved."

"That's not a sensible deduction." A third voice entered the conversation. A woman's voice. It sounded to the president as if it might belong to someone's grandmother, a cheery old soul with a tray of chocolate chip cookies and a pot of tea. But there was no one there.

"Who's there?"

The president swallowed hard and turned toward the translators, who appeared startled and said nothing. He and the general secretary exchanged a pair of deeply penetrating what-are-you-up-to looks.

"There's a woman in here," said Yusupov. His eyes bulged as he stared at the president. "You heard her, too."

"We are not a woman," announced the voice. "We are Pupumariionari."

Something materialized over the center of the table — something so totally different from anything else the president had ever seen, something so foreign, so alien, so *extraterrestrial*, that his mind was lost for words and he could only gawk foolishly at it.

Whatever it was, the thing looked like a tightly coiled ball of neon-blue earthworms. The ball was about the size of a cantaloupe. The earthworms were slithering around at an incredible, vision-blurring speed, but they stayed together in the shape of a ball, levitating a couple of inches above the tabletop and giving off tiny showers of blue sparks. This floating sphere of fast-moving galvanized blue spaghetti kept fading in and out of the president's field of vision, appearing and disappearing every three or four seconds, as though the intelligence behind it was exerting a substantial effort in order to breathe itself in and out of corporeal existence.

For a moment the four men just stared at it. The president's mind was blank. Then he thought one little thought.

Holy shit, he thought.

"You should never say your problems are too complicated to be solved," the wormball observed in its kindly granny's voice. "It would be more sensible to say you're too simple to solve your problems."

The president was too stunned to speak.

"Who . . . who are you?" whispered Yusupov.

"As we already explained, we are Pupumariionari," replied the wormball. It appeared and disappeared and appeared and disappeared over and

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over again like the mouth of some magical goldfish, the orifice of an ethereal realm opening and closing before their astonished eyes.

"Pupu . . . ? Where do you come from?"

"We Pupumariionari originated in the thunderclouds of the fourteenth planet of a binary star system in the heart of the Horsehead nebula, but we've come a long way since then. Right now we're running the missionary concession in this sector of the Milky Way. We've been observing Earth for 8,491 of your years, but that's just a blink of the optical orb in our life span, you understand."

"What do you want from us?" blurted the president.

"All we want is to help you survive long enough to have a chance of attaining spiritual enlightenment."

"Spiritual enlightenment?"

"That's right, dear." The wormball laughed gently. "We Pupumariionari hope that someday your species will be illuminated by the Truth. You intrigue us. Where else can we find a primitive, morally benighted lifeform hell-bent on parasitically destroying its host planet yet also capable of creating the Brandenburg Concertos? You see, even though *Homo sapiens* is the least intelligent of the 472 species we Pupumariionari are licensed to proselytize, there's something about you that really holds our interest — call it little unexpected flashes of spirituality."

The president sat there at a loss for words, staring like a deaf-mute at the writhing cantaloupe of neon-blue worms. Across the table, Viktor Yusupov was goggling at it in an equally dumbfounded fashion.

"One day you shall attain enlightenment. Because your intelligence level is so extraordinarily low, we shall be here to lend you a hand when you walk up the waterfall. Until then, it is our religious duty to stop you from murdering yourselves."

"You mean. . . ."

"Yes, dear. In order to save your people from nuclear annihilation, we have decided to intervene."

"Intervene?" cried Yusupov. "That's not acceptable!"

"He's right," said the president. "We can't let you make any decisions for us."

"Don't fret about that, dear. We Pupumariionari think according to the principles of logic that are beyond your understanding. A decision that would be right for us in our enlightenment might not be right for you in

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your ignorance, so we have no intention of telling you what to do. All we intend to do is present you and your problems to your own highest authority. Any decisions that are made will be made by him."

"Our own highest authority?" asked the president. "Who's that?"

"Twelve and a half billion human beings populate your planet, dear. We Pupumariionari have found one man among you who is wiser and more learned than any other. This man is completely free of corruption. He is supremely well practiced in the art and science of jurisprudence. His knowledge is vast, his insight deep. He is a much respected man, a man renowned the world over for his ability to make impartial decisions quickly, a man you'll both recognize instantly."

"*Who* are you talking about?" demanded Yusupov.

"Yes," said the president. "Tell us the name of this super Solomon."

"You'll find out soon enough," replied the wormball. "Just trust me when I say he's the one man who can solve all your problems. Let me tell you how he'll do it. He'll ask you a few key questions that cut right to the heart of the matter. If you try to be vague or evasive, he'll demand a straight answer. This man brooks no nonsense. I can promise you that within ten minutes at the very most, he'll settle your disagreements in a just and equitable manner."

"In ten minutes?" cried the president. "That's preposterous!"

"I smell trickery," said Yusupov. "I refuse your offer to bring us before this . . . this so-called highest authority of all."

"Me, too," said the president. "I refuse, too."

"Neither of you had a choice," said the wormball, its voice losing just a tad of its grandmotherly warmth. "Come."

The president came. He came walking out of the darkness. Yusupov came walking with him. They came walking side by side out of the darkness into a large, well-lit courtroom.

The president felt numb and tired. He'd traveled from Het Loo Palace to somewhere else, traveled through the darkness more quickly than he'd thought possible, and now he was feeling a bit light-headed and very tired, half asleep on his feet.

He and Yusupov came walking into the brilliant light of the courtroom. Vaguely, the president realized that one of them must be the plaintiff and the other the defendant, but he didn't know which one was which.

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Music filled the courtroom. It sounded remotely familiar in his ears, like the theme song from some long-dead TV series he'd watched twenty years ago. Over the music he heard an announcer's voice specifying the particulars of the case before the court.

And who presided over this court? Who was the highest authority of all?

Next to him the president heard Yusupov grunt in astonishment. The Russian was staring up at the bench, his eyes wide with wonder and awe.

The president looked, too. He lifted his head and gazed up at the highest authority of all.

"Oh, my God," he whispered. "It's Judge Wapner."

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 27: *In Which the Fur is Picked Clean of Nits, Gnats, Nuts, Naggers and Nuhdzes*

BECAUSE IT might get nasty, I've been putting off having this little chat with you. But when I walked in this evening, your mother told me you'd been absolutely *impossible* all day — "just wait till your father gets home!" — so just ignore the fact that I've removed my belt and have it lying here waiting for you to cop an attitude; and let us discuss this stuff as calmly as possible.

First, let's get this understood: unless I lose my mind entirely and make the error of savaging someone so scurrilously that it falls beyond the First Amendment's protection of opinion and criticism — which is simply not gonna happen as I have recently won a bogus, six-year-long slander suit brought against me and a magazine to which I gave an interview, and I am up to *here* in casebook law smarts about what beserk lengths one would have to go, to write something truly actionable — there is no way your cranky letters will convince The Editors Ferman to drop this column. That righteously ain't gonna happen, so save your breath.

Let me tell you *why* that ain't gonna happen . . .

Oh, wait a minute. Just so you don't think this entire column will be housekeeping, cleaning up ancillary hokey-pokey, here is a review for you.

ROBOCOP (Orion), despite its popularity, is as vicious a piece of wetwork* as anything I've encountered in recent memory. Devoid of

**"Wetwork": the "intelligence community's" currently fashionable doublespeak for the dirtiest deeds, the act of assasination, termination with extreme unction, or whatever. Originally a KGB term.*

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even the faintest scintilla of compassion or commonsense, it is as low as the foreheads of those members of the screening audience who cheered and laughed at each escalated scene of violence. It is a film about, and intended for, no less than brutes. It is a film that struck me as being made by, and for, savages and ghouls. Written by Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, and directed by the Dutchman Paul Verhoeven, this is a template for everything rabid and drooling in our culture. That it has been touted — after the fact — as being a "satirical" film, a "funny" film, is either ass-covering or a genuine representation of the filmmakers's ethically myopic view of what they've spawned. If the former, it's despicable hypocrisy; if the latter, that's just flat scary.

It is also, clearly and shockingly, a ripoff of the *Judge Dredd* comic strip from the U.K. And if the creators and owners of that character fail to initiate a copyright infringement action against producer Jon Davison, Orion and the scenarists, they are missing what is, in my opinion, an opportunity to get rich by bringing what appear to be literary graverobbers to justice. Stay away from this one at all costs.

Now, where were we? Right.

Why it isn't in the cards that your outraged letters will convince the management of this publication that I am a blot on their table of contents.

These essays are exceedingly popular.

Despite the half dozen or so letters that have been passed on to me, complaining about . . . well, I'll tell you what they've been complaining about in a moment . . . there have been hundreds of letters commending the work. And even when one of you stomps his/her widdle foot and demands his/her subscription be terminated forthwith, it isn't even a piddle matched against the occasional readers who have subscribed just so they *can* be assured of getting the material. (It's also bone stupid, and severs nose from noggin just to spite itself, because this is a *wonderful* magazine, filled every month with the best writing being done in the genre, and maybe some of the best being done in America in *any* form; with Budrys and Asimov working at the peak of their form in their specialties; and just ripping out or flipping past that which offends then, is far more rational.)

Now we come to the bottom line, which is purely that ten times the number of you who fret over my essays tell the Fermans and me that the first thing they turn to is *Watching*. And that is just the letters received. Most readers are de-

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cent folks who either like what they're getting, or flip past/rip out what they're getting that they *don't* like. So unless a groundswell of vituperation is raised, and an economically-potent segment of the readership says its had enough, we're going to be locked in this literary embrace for some time to come.

I must make a clear distinction here, about the types of letters we get. There are times when I make mistakes, either out of ignorance or slipped memory, and those of you who bring me to task for such errors are dear and valuable to me. At such times, I make every effort to retrace my steps in a later column, to clean up the picnic grounds, as it were:

(Frinstance. In reviewing *Gothic* in the September issue, I opined that director Ken Russell was indulging in his adolescent fantasies when he presented us with a scene in which the poet Shelley has a vision of Claire Clairmont's breasts with eyes that blink in place of nipples. Three or four readers — most notably Margaret L. Carter, Ph.D. and Teresa Nielson Hayden — hurriedly (but politely, informedly) advised me that "every well-read devotee of Gothic horror knows that Shelly actually experienced such a vision . . . It's in writing. . . . Shelly was inspired by a cryptic passage from Coleridge's 'Christabel,' describing the vampire-witch Geraldine: 'Behold! her bosom and half her side — a sight to dream of, not to tell!'"

(I freely cop to not being as encyclopedic in my familiarity with Gothic literature as many of you, but, in fact, I *was* aware of the referent. Nor is there anything in what I actually *wrote* that indicates otherwise. Here is what I wrote:

> It is redolent with symbolism. Much of that symbolism is ludicrous: Miriam Cyr as Claire, in a laudunum-induced vision as perceived by Shelley, bares her breasts, and in place of nipples there are staring eyes . . . which blink at him. The audience roars with laughter. Russell had overindulged his adolescent fantasies.

(What I was saying — and I think clearly — was that Russell had made an *artistic choice* in showing breast-eyes that blink. I then described the reaction of an audience *to that choice.* The question raised by readers familiar with the actual historic background, is moot. Whether the image as presented by Russell sprang from the director's imagination, or from Shelley's, is beside the point.

(Frequently, in writers' workshops I've taught, someone will hand in a story in which something happens that is of great importance to the writer, but which does not

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work on the page. And when it is brought to the writer's attention that is isn't believable, the unvarying response is. "But this *really* happened to my cousin Ernie and his wife. I was there, I saw it happen." To which, the proper reply is precisely the same I offer to Dr. Carter and Teresa: it doesn't *matter* if it's true; it matters if we *believe* it's true. The question, thus, devolves not on authenticity, but verisimilitude. This is a lesson difficult to impart to novice writers, for whom craft and expertise come only with time and trial.

(What I said in that snippet of the essay, was that Ken Russell, as the guiding intelligence behind the film, had *chosen* to show breasts with eyes . . . and then make them blink. Now it is possible that merely the sight of eyes would not have sent the audience into paroxysms of hilarity; but topping the grotesquerie by having those nipple-orbs *blink* was pure vaudeville; and the audience responded appropriately, thereby breaking the mood of bizarre fascination Russell was striving for. I was writing about a *film*, friends, not trying to demonstrate how arcane my wisdom might be.

(The interesting thing here, it seems to me, is that not one of the persons who called me on this "omission," had seen the movie. I was being chided for *apparently* not knowing something, even though the knowing or not-knowing didn't mean a whistle in context. For the purpose of the critique, I gave every bit of information that was needed.

(And as Einstein once observed, "Everything should be made as simple as possible. But not simpler."

(Get what I'm saying here? *Gothic* was not a film in which Shelley's fantasies, adolescent or otherwise, were being presented; it was a film in which Ken Russell's *interpretation* of those fantasies was being presented. The choice was not Shelley's, it was Russell's. And in my view — shared with a large audience — it was a ludicrous artistic choice.

(And isn't that what film, or book, or dance, or art criticism is about? The correctness of choices. The coherent and effective vision that coalesces from a congeries of artistic selections.)

With such letters, I have no problem. The careful reader has caught what may or may not be a slip in the critic's mantle of authority. As we have nothing to go on with a critic but our agreement to trust him/her and his/her viewpoint based on past performance, it is absolutely proper — and appreciated — for the careful reader to suggest, "You deemed not to know such&-such, and this puts your infallibili-

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ty in shadow. Please comment."

But there is another sort of letter. It is the splenic rodomontade that is intended to dismay the editors and pique my animosity. These are written by people who need attention. As one who needs attention, and who works out that need in a constructive manner by pursuing a career in which I write what I want to be noticed, I am on to these twits from line one, in which they say things almost always like this:

"You think you're pretty cute, don't you, Mr. Allison. Well, my name is George S——, and you've never heard of me, but I just wanted to tell you that you're rude and stupid and not nearly as sharp as you think you are. . . ." (But then, George, who among us *is*?)

These letters almost always go via the editors, and lament the leavetaking of the former film observer from these pages, suggesting that said person should be sought out with sled-dogs and sonar, and be brought back to that previous state of critical beatitude. On pain of having George's subscription cancelled, should the suggested program not be adopted.

Wel, forget that, too. It ain't gonna happen.

So if it isn't legitimate attempts to have errors corrrected, to what complaints *do* I object?

There are three, basically.

1) Ellison doesn't do reviews. He does these long, weird essays that once in a while *mention* a movie.

2) The first rule of being a columnist is that s/he will appear in each and every issue of the publication. Ellison keeps appearing irregularly. He'll do three or four in a row, then miss a month.

3) Ellison usually talks about movies that have come and gone from the theaters. He doesn't give us reviews that we can use as a guide to what to see.

There is also a lesser 4) which speaks to my not "reviewing everything," which usually means I've missed telling you about the latest autopsy movie in which a doorway to Hell opens in the basement of a boutique in a shopping mall built over an ancient graveyard that has been defiled by rutting yuppies, and a succubus takes possession of the mind and body of the busty jazzercise instructor, who slinks out whenever there's a Conelrad test on the Top 40 station, and eviscerates people in Ban-Lon pullovers by slovenly use of a cheese grater or apple corer.

Let me respond once and only, for the record, to these cavils. Here's where it may get nasty.

1) You're correct. I *don't* do reviews. I'm not much interested in doing reviews. There is a plethora of such reviewing already being

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done. In magazines published weekly, in newspapers published daily, on telecasts aired hourly; in specialty magazines used to huckster forthcoming films, that are endowed by the film companies themselve, available at every video shoppe and theater lobby in America; on the radio, in *America Film* and *Starlog* and *Cinefantastique* and *Prevue*. We are hip-deep in reviewers, ranging from Pauline Kael and Molly Haskell, who know what they're talking about, to Gary Franklin and David Sheehan, who have the intellectual insight of a speed bump. I won't even comment on the Siamese-critics whose syndicated review shows demonstrate even greater snippiness and discordancy than *I* visit on you.

What I am interested in (and the vast majority of those who have commented on these seem to share that interest) is the concept of film as potential Art. Books are reviewed in these pages by Mr. Budrys in essay form, speaking to the intentions of the creators, the effectiveness of their vision, the value of the writing in the greater context of establishing artistic criteria by which we can make informed judgments as to what is, and what ain't, worth our valuable reading time. Why should films not be treated equally as seriously?

These are *essays on film*. Not academic, stodgy *Cahiers du Cinema* wearinesses, intended to demonstrate the *cinéastes* erudition, or his Trivial Pursuit noodling of the least line from an obscure offering by Arnold Fanck (German director, 1889-1974, known for his mountaineering films), but an attempt by one who both loves and works in film, to illuminate technique, intentions, historical context, ethical values . . . *choices* . . .

The better to widen the aperture of a filmgoer's perceptions. The better to suggest a subtext for what may appear to be only momentary entertainment. The better, some might say, to educate and broaden horizons and afford more pleasure; as well as to suggest bases on which critical judgments can be made.

If the essays seem inconsistent, well, I rush to the words of Bernard Berenson: "Consistency requires you to be as ignorant today as you were a year ago."

As for the *way* in which I write these essays, well, I write to please myself first. If they also please *you*, then that's swell. If they don't, sorry about that, kiddo. But if I were to write for a supposed audience, I would wind up as bland and shallow as most of the reviewers you channel-hop to avoid. I write what interests me, and that pretty well takes care of complaint 4) because I am utterly disinterested in most of the

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hack films slambanged at you in saturation tv advertisements. I have no axes to grind, I am on the secret payroll of no studio or filmmaker, and if you think I'm going to sit through *Evil Dead 2* or *The Barbarians* just so your avaricious little heart doesn't feel it's missed something, then you'd better get out pad and pencil and dash off one of those letters to the Fermans, threatening them with loss of readership if they don't recall the previous tenant; because that is not what I'm about, and stop eyeing the belt, I haven't threatened you once, have I?

2) is easily handled. I do the best I can. I appear as frequently as my often-otherwise-occupied schedule permits. I do have to make a living writing other things. And though suchlike as Charles Platt and Christopher Priest bend themselves into hyperbolic pretzels proving I'll never complete *The Last Dangerous Visions*, that and other matters of import command most of my attention most of the time. I *enjoy* writing these essays. I do them because they are things I *want* to write, not because I have a deadline that *demands* I write them. It is my naive belief that you would rather read something the author was compelled to write, rather than just space-filler because a presumed readership expected to see something in this space. Don't fret about it: when I'm not here, there'll be a nifty story in this space that has put food on the table of a deserving writer.

And sometimes — though I know you'll find this difficult to believe — even though I once did a column saying *just* this — every once in a while I have *nothing* to say. It may have been a dry period for films worth detailing, it may have been that my brain wasn't all that fresh with concepts, it may have been that even films worth noting had been covered *in kind* in a previous column.

So. Sometimes I'm busy. Sometimes I miss my deadlines. Sometimes the well is dry. That's life, kids. It's also Art. You can have it good, but you may not have it Thursday.

But I've never seen stone tablets with the "rules for columnists" (as one jerk suggested) on which it is chiseled that a columnist *has* to appear regularly. I do the best I can, and I trust that when I can, it serves, If not, turn the dial or get out that pencil and pad.

On the third count, 3) that is, many of you do not seem to understand that this is a *monthly* publication, assembled at least three months before you get it. I'm writing this column on September 17th, having missed two issues because I was earning my living writing a 2-

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hour sf film for Roger Corman and NBC. Check the date on which you're reading this. *That's* what the lead-time is, every issue.

Now, because I live and work in the center of the film industry, I get to screen a great many films long before they are released, so I can cut down the lead-time in certain cases. And you reap that benefit, for whatever it's worth. I mean, how many of you will *actually* avoid seeing *Robocop* on the basis of my warning? You do have, after all, Free Will, despite what John Paul II tells you.

But even if I were to see any film I wanted to discuss in rough cut (and finding producers who'll let you see a film in that state of pre-final edit, no matter how knowledgeable you may be, is like trying to find a viable concept of ethics in Fawn Hall's touseled head), we'd still get that critique to you after the film had vanished from your Six-Plex.

So I discuss films I consider of merit or demerit, with my hope that you will seek them out or not, when they hit the nabes, as they say. Apparently I don't do all that badly, because I get letters from you telling me that you took my comments on, say, *The Witches of Eastwick* to heart and looked for the little things I pointed out. And you told me it made the evening's entertainment richer, and that you made a lot of points with your crowd discussing all that obscure shit.

So. This isn't a Maltin Guide to what to see at this moment. It is a column of essays on film. That's what it's supposed to be, what it's supposed to do, and what I *want* to do. For those of you eyeing the belt, I know you'll advise the Fermans of your thwarted desires. For the rest of you, if you have a moment, you might drop a postcard to the editors.

They do so feel besieged from time to time. It's not easy having a resident feral child on the premises.

ANCILLARY MATTERS: While it is not, strictly speaking, the province of these columns to deal with books (heaven knows this magazine already boasts a small cadre of the best reviewers and critics in the game), every now and again I fudge the rules in a way I find ethically supportable — complementary in the mode used to make statistics gibber and dance so they unarguably prove contradictory theses — and I attempt to enrich your souls with special titles that have, at least, a thematic link to the fantastic in films. To that end, I draw your attention to a trio of slim trade paperbacks from Copper Canyon Press: three cycles of poetry by Pablo Neruda.

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Having been lately disabused of the frivolous conceit that there are some things in the world that everyone *must* be aware of (a casual remark to a human being in its mid-thirties, the other day, on the long-overdue death of Rudolf Hess in Spandau, brought me a querulous stare and the response *Who?*), I hasten to repeat the name Neruda for those few of you who are unfamiliar with the exquisite writings of the late Chilean poet. (That anyone could reach his/her majority not having read and marveled at Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, is a concept I grapple with, with difficulty.)

Neruda, then.

THE SEPARATE ROSE (*La Rosa Separada*) is the first English translation (by William O'Daly, who has splendidly recast all three of these important works) of a poem sequence proceeding from Neruda's visit to Easter Island in 1971. Don Pablo was dying of cancer, and knew it (he passed away in September of 1973). The great poet had grown steadily disenchanted with much of the human race. As O'Daly puts it in his introduction, "By the late 1960s, Neruda had come to consider himself one member of a global civilization gone awry. He felt that the entire world was caught up in the trend of escalating national defense budgets at the expense of the human stomach and spirit." And so, perhaps to reestablish contact with an innocence of Nature that would succor him in those days dwindling to darkness, he journeyed to that last island in the Polynesian chain to be settled, called Rapanui by its inhabitants (who also identify themselves by that name), to touch, at final moments, the fantastic; the mysterious; the primal.

The sequence alternates sections called *The Men* and *The Island*. Here is one of the latter:

When the giants multiplied
and walked tall and straight
till they covered the island with
stone noses
and, so very alive, ordained their
descendants: the children
of wind and lava, the grandchildren
of air and ash, they would stride
on gigantic feet across their island:
the breeze worked harder than
ever
with her hands,
the typhoon with her crime,
that persistence of Oceania.

There is a moral plangency in every line of *La Rosa Separada* that cries Neruda had paid the price for sharing, perhaps at too severe a measure, all decent people's concern for the condition of the human condition. There is, as O'Daly notes, "the guilty pathos of our time" passim the work, a quality at once sobering and ineffably human, that

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reminds us how much of singing wind and stinging self-examination we derive from the Nerudas among us, who weep that we are no better than we think we are . . . rather than how much better we wish we were.

STILL ANOTHER DAY (Aún) is special even as part of a special canon. In these 433 verses written in two days of July 1969, the Nobel laureate — knowing he was soon to die — bid farewell to his beloved Chilean people. He said this:

Pardon me, if when I want
to tell the story of my life
it's the land I talk about.
This is the land.
It grows in your blood
and you grow.
If it dies in your blood
you die out.

Therein, resonating to the words of another poet, W.S. Merwin, that "the story of each stone leads back to a mountain," lies my rationale for including book reviews in what is usually an essay on film. In these days of "harmonic convergence" we perceive that the places of power on this planet draw our noblest attention. Neruda's soul and artistry were similarly drawn; and throughout his *oeuvre* we encounter the Mystic Venue as both trope and supernatural icon. It is this specific element of Neruda's sensibility that provides me the interstice through which to wriggle his wonderfulness before you. Please do not upbraid me too severely for this jiggery-pokery; as your mother or the head matron at the Home used to say when she forced you to swallow such yuchhh as lima beans or castor oil, "It's for your own good." The difference being, Neruda goes down sweetly and easily, producing smile rather than stricture.

And finally, WINTER GARDEN (Jardín de Invierno), in O'Daly's lyrical, authorized translation, is one of the eight unpublished manuscripts found on Neruda's desk on the day of his death. In its twenty verses, this tidy offering sums up Neruda's life and work, expresses his understanding of his imminent death, speaks of solitude and duty as necessary for the proper life, but returns once again to Nature as the wellspring of regeneration.

Taken in sum (and available from Copper Canyon Press, PO Box 271, Port Townsend, Washington 98368 — $8.00 each for the first and third titles noted here, $7.00 for *Aún*) these books are a legacy of buoyancy for the spirit; words that not only enrich and uplift, but ennoble; important art for a world too often compelled to contemplate mud and shoetops. For those of you who know not of Neruda, whose reading time is spent with paperback novels whose exteriors feature die-cut and

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embossing and whose interiors feature disembowelment and ennui, set yourselves the delirious, the heady task of soaring with one of the great souls this century has produced. Forego just one film and treat yourself to Neruda. It's for your own good.

And next time — now that the June-to-September hell in which I lived while writing *Cutter's World* for Corman and NBC has reached an end — get your fangs set for an essay I've been dying to write for several years. I only needed a hook. The hook is Mel Brook's *Spaceballs*, and the subject is my belief that *most* (not all, note that I said not *all*) sf fans and/or readers have no sense of humor, and that which they do have is fit only for films such as *Spaceballs*.

The subject next time will be wit. Not a sense of humor, but *wit*.

And just so you don't feel cheated because I didn't "review" anything else, here's another: HARRY AND THE HENDERSONS (Universal/Amblin Entertainment) is a delight. It's manipulative as a *Rocky* flick, but the manipulation is in service of making us feel good, and hey, I'll invest in that any day.

See how good I am to you? Now stop crying, and go downstairs and apologize to your mother, and wash up for dinner while I put my belt back on and burn these imbecile letters George and the others sent.

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The setting for this fascinating alternative history is India in the 1940's and its occupation by a victorious German army. Its author is new to F&SF, but Mr. Turtledove has had stories in Analog *and* Asimov's *and has several novels coming out shortly, including NONINTERFERENCE (Del Rey) and AGENT OF BYZANTIUM (Isaac Asimov Presents).*

THE LAST ARTICLE

By Harry Turtledove

Nonviolence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed.

— Mohandas Gandhi

The one means that wins the easiest victory over reason: terror and force.

— Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

THE TANK RUMBLED down the Rajpath, past the ruins of the Memorial Arch, toward the India Gate. The gateway arch was still standing, although it had taken a couple of shell hits in the fighting before New Delphi fell. The Union Jack fluttered above it.

British troops lined both sides of the Rajpath, watching silently as the tank rolled past them. Their khaki uniforms were filthy and torn; many wore bandages. They had the weary, past-caring stares of beaten men, though the Army of India had fought until flesh and munitions gave out.

The India Gate drew near. A military bank, smartened up for the oc-

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casion, began to play as the tank went past. The bagpipes sounded thin and lost in the hot, humid air.

A single man stood waiting in the shadow of the gate. Field Marshal Walther Model leaned down into the cupola of the Panzer IV. "No one can match the British at ceremonies of this sort," he said to his aide.

Major Dieter Lasch laughed, a bit unkindly. "They've had enough practice, sir," he answered, raising his voice to be heard over the flatulent roar of the tank's engine.

"What is that tune?" the field marshal asked. "Does it have a meaning?"

"It's called 'The World Turned Upside Down,'" said Lasch, who had been involved with his British opposite number in planning the formal surrender. "Lord Cornwallis's army musicians played it when he yielded to the Americans at Yorktown."

"Ah, the Americans." Model was for a moment so lost in his own thoughts that his monocle threatened to slip from his right eye. He screwed it back in. The single lens was the only thing he shared with the clichéd image of a high German officer. He was no lean, hawk-faced Prussian. But his rounded features were unyielding, and his stocky body sustained the energy of his will better than the thin, dyspeptic frames of so many aristocrats. "The Americans," he repeated. "Well, that will be the next step, won't it? But enough. One thing at a time."

The panzer stopped. The driver switched off the engine. The sudden quiet was startling. Model leaped nimbly down. He had been leaping down from tanks for eight years now, since his days as a staff officer for the IV Corps in the Polish campaign.

The man in the shadows stepped forward, saluted. Flashbulbs lit his long, tired face as German photographers recorded the moment for history. The Englishman ignored cameras and cameramen alike. "Field Marshal Model," he said politely. He might have been about to discuss the weather.

Model admired his sangfroid. "Field Marshal Auchinleck," he replied, returning the salute and giving Auchinleck a last few seconds to remain his equal. Then he came back to the matter at hand. "Field Marshal, have you signed the instrument of surrender of the British Army of India to the forces of the Reich?"

"I have," Auchinleck replied. He reached into the left pocket of his battle dress, removed a folded sheet of paper. Before handing it to Model, though, he said, "I should like to request your permission

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to make a brief statement at this time."

"Of course, sir. You may say what you like, at whatever length you like." In victory, Model could afford to be magnanimous. He had even granted Marshal Zhukov leave to speak in the Soviet capitulation at Kuibyshev, before the marshal was taken out and shot.

"I thank you." Auchinleck stiffly dipped his head. "I will say, then, that I find the terms I have been forced to accept to be cruelly hard on the brave men who have served under my command."

"That is your privilege, sir." But Model's round face was no longer kindly, and his voice had iron in it as he replied, "I must remind you, however, that my treating with you at all under the rules of war is an act of mercy for which Berlin may yet reprimand me. When Britain surrendered in 1941, all Imperial forces were also ordered to lay down their arms. I daresay you did not expect us to come so far, but I would be within my rights in reckoning you no more than so many bandits."

A slow flush darkened Auchinleck's cheeks. "We gave you a bloody good run, for bandits."

"So you did." Model remained polite. He did not say he would ten times rather fight straight-up battles than deal with the partisans who to this day harassed the Germans and their allies in occupied Russia. "Have you anything further to add?"

"No, sir, I do not." Auchinleck gave the German the signed surrender, handed him his sidearm. Model put the pistol in the empty holster he wore for the occasion. It did not fit well; the holster was made for a Walther P38, not this man-killing brute of a Webley and Scott. That mattered little, though — the ceremony was almost over.

Auchinleck and Model exchanged salutes for the last time. The British field marshal stepped away. A German lieutenant came up to lead him into captivity.

Major Lasch waved his left hand. The Union Jack came down from the flagpole on the India Gate. The swastika rose to replace it.

Lasch tapped discreetly on the door, stuck his head into the field marshal's office. "That Indian politician is here for his appointment with you, sir."

"Oh yes. Very well, Dieter, send him in." Model had been dealing with Indian politicians even before the British surrender, and with hordes of

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them now that resistance was over. He had no more liking for the breed than for Russian politicians, or even German ones. No matter what pious principles they spouted, his experience was that they were all out for their own good first.

The small, frail brown man the aide showed in made him wonder. The Indian's emaciated frame and the plain white cotton loincloth that was his only garment contrasted starkly with the Victorian splendor of the Viceregal Palace from which Model was administering the Reich's new conquest. "Sit down, *Herr* Gandhi," the field marshal urged.

"I thank you very much, sir." As he took his seat, Gandhi seemed a child in an adult's chair: it was much too wide for him, and its soft, overstuffed cushions hardly sagged under his meager weight. But his eyes, Model saw, were not child's eyes. They peered with disconcerting keenness through his wire-framed spectacles as he said, "I have come to inquire when we may expect German troops to depart from our country."

Model leaned forward, frowning. For a moment he thought he had misunderstood Gandhi's Gujarati-flavored English. When he was sure he had not, he said, "Do you think perhaps we have come all this way as tourists?"

"Indeed I do not." Gandhi's voice was sharp with disapproval. "Tourists do not leave so many dead behind them."

Model's temper kindled. "No, tourists do no pay such a high price for the journey. Having come regardless of that cost, I assure you we shall stay."

"I am very sorry, sir; I cannot permit it."

"You cannot?" Again, Model had to concentrate to keep his monocle from falling out. He had heard arrogance from politicians before, but this scrawny old devil surpassed belief. "Do you forget I can call my aide and have you shot behind this building? You would not be the first, I assure you."

"Yes, I know that," Gandhi said sadly. "If you have that fate in mind for me, I am an old man. I will not run."

Combat had taught Model a hard indifference to the prospect of injury or death. He saw the older man possessed something of the same sort, however he had acquired it. A moment later he realized his threat had not only failed to frighten Gandhi, but had actually amused him. Disconcerted, the field marshal said, "Have you any serious issues to address?"

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"Only the one I named just now. We are a nation of more than 300 million; it is no more just for Germany to rule us than for the British."

Model shrugged. "If we are able to, we will. We have the strength to hold what we have conquered, I assure you."

"Where there is no right, there can be no strength," Gandhi said. "We will not permit you to hold us in bondage."

"Do you think to threaten me?" Model growled. In fact, though, the Indian's audacity surprised him. Most of the locals had fallen over themselves, fawning on their new masters. Here, at least, was a man out of the ordinary.

Gandhi was still shaking his head, although Model saw he had still not frightened him (a man out of the ordinary indeed, thought the field marshal, who respected courage when he found it). "I make no threats, sir, but I will do what I believe to be right."

"Most noble," Model said, but to his annoyance the words came out sincere rather than with the sardonic edge he had intended. He had heard such canting phrases before, from Englishmen, from Russians, yes, and from Germans as well. Somehow, though, this Gandhi struck him as one who always meant exactly what he said. He rubbed his chin, considering how to handle such an intransigent.

A large green fly came buzzing into the office. Model's air of detachment vanished the moment he heard that malignant whine. He sprang from his seat, swatted at the fly. He missed. The insect flew around awhile longer, then settled on the arm of Gandhi's chair. "Kill it," Model told him. "Last week one of those accursed things bit me on the neck, and I still have the lump to prove it."

Gandhi brought his hand down, but several inches from the fly. Frightened, it took off. Gandhi rose. He was surprisingly nimble for a man nearing eighty. He chivied the fly out of the office, ignoring Model, who watched his performance in openmouthed wonder.

"I hope it will not trouble you again," Gandhi said, returning as calmly as if he had done nothing out of the ordinary. "I am one of those who practice ahimsa: I will do no injury to any living thing."

Model remembered the fall of Moscow, and the smell of burning bodies filling the chilly autumn air. He remembered machine guns knocking down cossack cavalry before they could close, and the screams of the wounded horses, more heartrending than any woman's. He knew of other

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things, too, things he had not seen for himself and of which he had no desire to learn more.

"*Herr* Gandhi," he said, "how do you propose to bend to your will someone who opposes you, if you will not use force for the purpose?"

"I have never said I will not use force, sir." Gandhi's smile invited the field marshal to enjoy with him the distinction he was making. "I will not use violence. If my people refuse to cooperate in any way with yours, how can you compel them? What choice will you have but to grant us leave to do as we will?"

Without the intelligence estimates he had read, Model would have dismissed the Indian as a madman. No madman, though, could have caused the British so much trouble. But perhaps the decadent Raj simply had not made him afraid. Model tried again. "You understand that what you have said is treason against the Reich," he said harshly.

Gandhi bowed in his seat. "You may, of course, do what you will with me. My spirit will in any case survive among my people."

Model felt his face heat. Few men were immune to fear. Just his luck, he thought sourly, to have run into one of them. "I warn you, *Herr* Gandhi, to obey the authority of the officials of the Reich, or it will be the worse for you."

"I will do what I believe to be right, and nothing else. If you Germans exert yourselves toward the freeing of India, joyfully will I work with you. If not, then I regret we must be foes."

The field marshal gave him one last chance to see reason. "Were it you and I alone, there might be some doubt as to what would happen." Not much, he thought, not when Gandhi was twenty-odd years older and thin enough to break like a stick. He fought down the irrelevance, went on, "But where, *Herr* Gandhi, is your *Wehrmacht*?"

Of all things, he had least expected to amuse the Indian again. Yet Gandhi's eyes unmistakably twinkled behind the lenses of his spectacles. "Field Marshal, I have an army, too."

Model's patience, never of the most enduring sort, wore thin all at once. "Get out!" he snapped.

Gandhi stood, bowed, and departed. Major Lasch stuck his head into the office. The field marshal's glare drove him out again in a hurry.

"Well?" Jawaharlal Nehru paced back and forth. Tall, slim, and satur-

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nine, he towered over Gandhi without dominating him. "Dare we use the same policies against the Germans that we employed against the English?"

"If we wish our land free, dare we do otherwise?" Gandhi replied. "They will not grant our wish of their own violation. Model struck me as a man not much different from various British leaders whom we have succeeded in vexing in the past." He smiled at the memory of what passive resistance had done to officials charged with combating it.

"Very well, satyagraha it is." But Nehru was not smiling. He had less humor than his older colleague.

Gandhi teased him gently: "Do you fear another spell in prison, then?" Both men had spent time behind bars during the war, until the British released them in a last, vain effort to rally the support of the Indian people to the Raj.

"You know better." Nehru refused to be drawn, and persisted, "The rumors that come out of Europe frighten me."

"Do you tell me you take them seriously?" Gandhi shook his head in surprise and a little reproof. "Each side in any war will always paint its opponents as blackly as it can."

"I hope you are right, and that that is all. Still, I confess I would feel more at ease with what we plan to do if you found me one Jew, officer or other rank, in the army now occupying us."

"You would be hard-pressed to find any among the forces they defeated. The British have little love for Jews, either."

"Yes, but I daresay it could be done. With the Germans, they are banned by law. The English would never make such a rule. And while the laws are vile enough, I think of the tales that man Wiesenthal told, the one who came here the gods know how across Russia and Persia from Poland."

"Those I do not believe," Gandhi said firmly. "No nation could act in that way and hope to survive. Where could men be found to carry out such horrors?"

"*Azad Hind*," Nehru said, quoting the "Free India" motto of the locals who had fought on the German side.

But Gandhi shook his head. "They are only soldiers, doing as soldiers have always done. Wiesenthal's claims are for an entirely different order of bestiality, one that could not exist without destroying the fabric of the state that gave it birth."

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"I hope very much you are right," Nehru said.

WALTHER MODEL slammed the door behind him hard enough to make his aide, whose desk faced away from the field marshal's office, jump in alarm. "Enough of this twaddle for one day," Model said. "I need schnapps, to get the taste of these Indians out of my mouth. Come along if you care to, Dieter."

"Thank you, sir." Major Lasch threw down his pen, eagerly got to his feet. "I sometimes think conquering India was easier than ruling it will be."

Model rolled his eyes. "I *know* it was. I would ten times rather be planning a new campaign than sitting here bogged down in pettifogging details. The sooner Berlin sends me people trained in colonial administration, the happier I will be."

The bar might have been taken from an English pub. It was dark, quiet, and paneled in walnut; a dartboard still hung on the wall. But a German sergeant in field gray stood behind the bar, and, despite the lazily turning ceiling fan, the temperature was close to thirty-five Celsius. The one might have been possible in occupied London, the other not.

Model knocked back his first shot at a gulp. He sipped his second more slowly, savoring it. Warmth spread through him, warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of the evening. He leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers. "A long day," he said.

"Yes, sir," Lasch agreed. "After the effrontery of that Gandhi, any day would seem a long one. I've rarely seen you so angry." Considering Model's temper, that was no small statement.

"Ah yes, Gandhi." Model's tone was reflective rather than irate; Lasch looked at him curiously. The field marshal said, "For my money, he's worth a dozen of the ordinary sort."

"Sir?" The aide no longer tried to hide his surprise.

"He is an honest man. He tells me what he thinks, and he will stick by that. I may kill him — I may have to kill him — but he and I will both know why, and I will not change his mind." Model took another sip of schnapps. He hesitated, as if unsure whether to go on. At last he did. "Do you know, Dieter, after he left I had a vision."

"Sir?" Now Lasch was alarmed.

The field marshal might have read his aide's thoughts. He chuckled

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wryly. "No, no, I am not about to swear off eating beefsteak and wear sandals instead of my boots, that I promise. But I saw myself as a Roman procurator, listening to the rantings of some early Christian priest."

Lasch raised an eyebrow. Such musings were unlike Model, who was usually direct to the point of bluntness and altogether materialistic — assets in the makeup of a general officer. The major cautiously sounded these unexpected depths: "How do you suppose the Roman felt, facing that kind of man?"

"Bloody confused, I suspect," Model said, which sounded more like him. "And because he and his comrades did not know how to handle such fanatics, you and I are Christians today, Dieter."

"So we are." The major rubbed his chin. "Is that a bad thing?"

Model laughed and finished his drink. "From your point of view or mine, no. But I doubt that old Roman would agree with us, any more than Gandhi agrees with me over what will happen next here. But then, I have two advantages over the dead procurator." He raised his finger; the sergeant hurried over to fill his glass.

At Lasch's nod, the young man also poured more schnapps for him. The major drank, then said, "I should hope so. We are more civilized, more sophisticated, than the Romans ever dreamed of being."

But Model was still in that fey mood. "Are we? My procurator was such a sophisticate that he tolerated anything, and never saw the danger in a foe who would not do the same. Our Christian God, though, is a jealous god who puts up with no rivals. And one who is a National Socialist serves also the *Volk*, to whom he owes sole loyalty. I am immune to Gandhi's virus in a way the Roman was not to the Christian's."

"Yes, that makes sense," Lasch agreed after a moment. "I had not thought of it in that way, but I see it is so. And what is our other advantage over the Roman procurator?"

Suddenly the field marshal looked hard and cold, much the way he had looked leading the tanks of Third Panzer against the Kremlin compound. "The machine gun," he said.

The rising sun's rays made the sandstone of the Red Fort seem even more the color of blood. Gandhi frowned and turned his back on the fortress, not caring for that thought. Even at dawn the air was warm and muggy.

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"I wish you were not here," Nehru told him. The younger man lifted his trademark fore-and-aft cap, scratched his graying hair, and glanced at the crowd growing around them. "The Germans' orders forbid assemblies, and they will hold you responsible for this gathering."

"I am, am I not?" Gandhi replied. "Would you have me send my followers into a danger I do not care to face myself? How would I presume to lead them afterward?"

"A general does not fight in the front ranks," Nehru came back. "If you are lost to our cause, will we be able to go on?"

"If not, then surely the cause is not worthy, yes? Now let us be going."

Nehru threw his hands in the air. Gandhi nodded, satisfied, and worked his way toward the head of the crowd. Men and women stepped aside to let him through. Still shaking his head, Nehru followed.

The crowd slowly began to march east up Chandni Chauk, the Street of Silversmiths. Some of the fancy shops had been wrecked in the fighting, more looted afterward. But others were opening up, their owners as happy to take German money as they had been to serve the British before.

One of the proprietors, a man who had managed to stay plump even through the past year of hardship, came rushing out of his shop when he saw the procession go by. He ran to the head of the march and spotted Nehru, whose height and elegant dress singled him out.

"Are you out of your mind?" the silversmith shouted. "The Germans have banned assemblies. If they see you, something dreadful will happen."

"Is it not dreadful that they take away the liberty that properly belongs to us?" Gandhi asked. The silversmith spun round. His eyes grew wide when he recognized the man who was speaking to him. Gandhi went on, "Not only is it dreadful, it is wrong. And so we do not recognize the German's right to ban anything we may choose to do. Join us, will you?"

"Great-souled one, I — I—," the silversmith spluttered. Then his glance slid past Gandhi. "The Germans!" he squeaked. He turned and ran.

Gandhi led the procession toward the approaching squad. The Germans stamped down Chandni Chauk as if they expected the people in front of them to melt from their path. Their gear, Gandhi thought, was not that much different from what British soldiers wore: ankle boots, shorts, and open-necked tunics. But their coal-scuttle helmets gave them a look of sullen, beetle-browed ferocity the British tin hat did not convey. Even

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for a man of Gandhi's equanimity, it was daunting, as no doubt it was intended to be.

"Hello, my friends," he said. "Do any of you speak English?"

"I speak it, a little," one of them replied. His shoulder straps had the twin pips of a sergeant major: he was the squad leader, then. He hefted his rifle, not menacingly, Gandhi thought, but to emphasize what he was saying. "Go to your homes back. This coming together is *verboten*."

"I am sorry, but I must refuse to obey your order," Gandhi said. "We are walking peacefully on our own street in our own city. We will harm no one, no matter what; this I promise you. But walk we will, as we wish." He repeated himself until he was sure the sergeant major understood.

The German spoke to his comrades in his own language. One of the soldiers raised his gun and with a nasty smile pointed it at Gandhi. The Indian nodded politely. The German blinked to see him unafraid. The sergeant major slapped the rifle down. One of his men had a field telephone on his back. The sergeant major cranked it, waited for a reply, spoke urgently into it.

Nehru caught Gandhi's eye. His dark, tired gaze was full of worry. Somehow that nettled Gandhi more than the Germans' arrogance in ordering about his people. He began to walk forward again. The marchers followed him, flowing around the German squad like water flowing round a boulder.

The soldier who had pointed his rifle at Gandhi shouted in alarm. He brought up the weapon again. The sergeant major barked at him. Reluctantly, he lowered it.

"A sensible man," Gandhi said to Nehru. "He sees we do no injury to him or his, and so does none to us."

"Sadly, though, not everyone is so sensible," the younger man replied, "as witness his lance corporal there. And even a sensible man may not be well inclined to us. You notice he is still on the telephone."

The phone on Field Marshal Model's desk jangled. He jumped and swore; he had left orders he was to be disturbed only for an emergency. He had to find time to work. He picked up the phone. "This had better be good," he growled without preamble.

He listened, swore again, slammed the receiver down. "Lasch!" he shouted.

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It was his aide's turn to jump. "Sir?"

"Don't just sit there on your fat arse," the field marshal said unfairly. "Call out my car and driver, and quickly. Then belt on your sidearm and come along. The Indians are doing something stupid. Oh yes, order out a platoon and have them come after us. Up on Chandni Chauk, the trouble is."

Lasch called for the car and the troops, then hurried after Model. "A riot?" he asked as he caught up.

"No, no." Model moved his stumpy frame along so fast that the taller Lasch had to trot beside him. "Some of Gandhi's tricks, damn him."

The field marshal's Mercedes was waiting when he and his aide hurried out of the Viceregal Palace. "Chandni Chauk," Model snapped as the driver held the door open for him. After that he sat in furious silence as the powerful car roared up Irwin Road, round a third of Connaught Circle, and north on Chelmsford Road past the bombed-out railway station until, for no reason Model could see, the street's name changed to Qutb Road.

A little later the driver said, "Some kind of disturbance up ahead, sir."

"Disturbance?" Lasch echoed, leaning forward to peer through the windscreen. "It's a whole damned regiment's worth of Indians coming at us. Don't they know better than that? And what the devil," he added, his voice rising, "are so many of our men doing ambling along beside them? Don't they know they're supposed to break up this sort of thing?" In his indignation he did not notice he was repeating himself.

"I suspect they don't," Model said dryly. "Gandhi, I gather, can have that effect on people who aren't ready for his peculiar brand of stubbornness. That, however, does not include me." He tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Pull up about two hundred meters in front of the first rank of them, Joachim."

"Yes, sir."

Even before the car had stopped moving, Model jumped out of it. Lasch, hand on his pistol, was close behind, protesting, "What if one of those fanatics has a gun?"

"Then Colonel General Weidling assumes command, and a lot of Indians end up dead." Model strode toward Gandhi, ignoring the German troops who were drawing themselves to stiff, horrified attention at the sight of his field marshal's uniform. He would deal with them later. For the moment, Gandhi was more important.

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He had stopped — which meant the rest of the marchers did, too — and was waiting politely for Model to approach. The German commandant was not impressed. He thought Gandhi sincere, and could not doubt his courage, but none of that mattered at all. He said harshly, "You were warned against this sort of behavior."

Gandhi looked him in the eye. They were very much of a height. "And I told you, I do not recognize your right to give such orders. This is our country, not yours, and if some of us choose to walk on our streets, we will do so."

From behind Gandhi, Nehru's glance flicked worriedly from one of the antagonists to the other. Model noticed him only peripherally; if Nehru was already afraid, he could be handled whenever necessary. Gandhi was a tougher nut. The field marshal waved at the crowd behind the old man. "You are responsible for all these people. If harm come to them, you will be to blame."

"Why should harm come to them? They are not soldiers. They do not attack your men. I told that to one of your sergeants, and he understood it, and refrained from hindering us. Surely you, sir, an educated, cultured man, can see that what I say is self-evident truth."

Model turned his head to speak to his aide in German: "If we did not have Goebbels, this would be the one for his job." He shuddered to think of the propaganda victory Gandhi would win if he got away with flouting German ordinances. The whole countryside would be boiling with partisans in a week. And he had already managed to hoodwink some Germans into letting him do it!

Then Gandhi surprised him again. "*Ich danke Ihnen, Herr Generalfeldmarschall, aber das glaube ich kein Kompliment zu sein,*" he said in slow but clear German: "I thank you, Field Marshal, but I believe that to be no compliment."

Having to hold his monocle in place helped Model keep his face straight. "Take it however you like," he said. "Get these people off the street, or they and you will face the consequences. We will do what you force us to."

"I force you to nothing. As for these people who follow, each does so of his or her own free will. We are free, and will show it, not by violence, but through firmness in truth."

Now Model listened with only half an ear. He had kept Gandhi talking

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long enough for the platoon he had ordered out to arrive. Half a dozen SdKfz 251 armored personnel carriers came clanking up. The men piled out of them. "Give me a firing line, three ranks deep," Model shouted. As the troopers scrambled to obey, he waved the half-tracks into position behind them, all but blocking Qutb Road. The half-tracks' commanders swiveled the machine guns at the front of the vehicles' troop compartments so they bore on the Indians.

Gandhi watched these preparations as calmly as if they had nothing to do with him. Again Model had to admire his calm. Gandhi's followers were less able to keep fear from their faces. Very few, though, used the pause to slip away. Gandhi's discipline was a long way from the military sort, but effective all the same.

"Tell them to disperse now, and we can still get away without bloodshed," the field marshal said.

"We will shed no one's blood, sir. But we will continue on our pleasant journey. Moving carefully, we will, I think, be able to get between your large lorries there." Gandhi turned to wave his people forward once more.

"You insolent —" Rage choked Model, which was as well, for it kept him from cursing Gandhi like a fishwife. To give him time to master his temper, he plucked his monocle from his eye and began polishing the lens with a silk handkerchief. He replaced the monocle, started to jam the handkerchief back into his trouser pocket, then suddenly had a better idea.

"Come, Lasch," he said, and started toward the waiting German troops. About halfway to them, he dropped the handkerchief on the ground. He spoke in loud, simple German so his men and Gandhi could both follow: "If any Indians come past this spot, I wash my hands of them."

He might have known Gandhi would have a comeback ready. "That is what Pilate said also, you will recall, sir."

"Pilate washed his hands to evade responsibility," the field marshal answered steadily; he was in control of himself again. "I accept it: I am responsible to my Führer and to the *Oberkommando-Wehrmacht* for maintaining Reichs control over India, and will do what I see fit to carry out that obligation."

For the first time since they had come to know each other, Gandhi looked sad. "I too, sir, have my responsibilities." He bowed slightly to Model.

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Lasch chose that moment to whisper in his commander's ear: "Sir, what of our men over there? Had you planned to leave them in the line of fire?"

The field marshal frowned. He had planned to do just that; the wretches deserved no better, for being taken in by Gandhi. But Lasch had a point. The platoon might balk at shooting countrymen, if it came to that. "You men," Model said sourly, jabbing his marshal's baton at them, "fall in behind the armored personnel carriers, at once."

The Germans' boots pounded on the macadam as they dashed to obey. They were still all right, then, with a clear order in front of them. Something, Model thought, but not much.

He had also worried that the Indians would take advantage of the moment of confusion to press forward, but they did not. Gandhi and Nehru and a couple of other men were arguing among themselves. Model nodded once. Some of them knew he was earnest, then. And Gandhi's followers' discipline, as the field marshal had thought a few minutes ago, was not of the military sort. He could not simply issue an order and know his will would be done.

"I issue no orders," Gandhi said. "Let each man follow his conscience as he will — what else is freedom?"

"They will follow *you* if you go forward, great-souled one," Nehru replied, "and that German, I fear, means to carry out his threat. Will you throw your life away, and those of your countrymen?"

"I will not throw my life away," Gandhi said, but before the men around him could relax, he went on, "I will gladly give it, if freedom requires that. I am but one man. If I fall, others will surely carry on; perhaps the memory of me will serve to make them more steadfast."

He stepped forward.

"Oh damnation," Nehru said softly, and followed.

For all his vigor, Gandhi was far from young. Nehru did not need to nod to the marchers close by him; of their own accord, they hurried ahead of the man who had led them for so long, forming with their bodies a barrier between him and the German guns.

He tried to go faster. "Stop! Leave me my place! What are you doing?" he cried, though in his heart he understood only too well.

"This once, they will not listen to you," Nehru said.

"But they must!" Gandhi peered through eyes dimmed now by tears

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as well as age. "Where is that stupid handkerchief? We must be almost to it!"

"For the last time, I warn you to halt!" Model shouted. The Indians still came on. The sound of their feet, sandal-clad or bare, was like a growing murmur on the pavement, very different from the clatter of German boots. "Fools!" the field marshal muttered under his breath. He turned to his men. "Take your aim!"

The advance slowed when the rifles came up; of that Model was certain. For a moment he thought that ultimate threat would be enough to bring the marchers to their senses. But then they advanced again. The Polish cavalry had shown that same reckless bravery, charging with lances and sabers and carbines against the German tanks. Model wondered whether the inhabitants of the *Reichsgeneralgouvernement* of Poland thought the gallantry worthwhile.

A man stepped on the field marshal's handkerchief. "Fire!" Model said.

A second passed, two. Nothing happened. Model scowled at his men. Gandhi's deviltry had got into them; sneaky as a Jew, he was turning the appearance of weakness into a strange kind of strength. But then trained discipline paid its dividend. One finger tightened on a Mauser trigger. A single shot rang out. As if it were a signal that recalled the other men to their duty, they, too, began to fire. From the armored personnel carriers, the machine guns started their deadly chatter. Model heard screams above the gunfire.

The volley smashed into the front ranks of marchers at close range. Men fell. Others ran, or tried to, only to be held by the power of the stream still advancing behind them. Once begun, the Germans methodically poured fire into the column of Indians. The march dissolved into a panic-stricken mob.

Gandhi still tried to press forward. A fleeing wounded man smashed into him, splashing him with blood and knocking him to the ground. Nehru and another man immediately lay down on top of him.

"Let me up! Let me up!" he shouted.

"No," Nehru screamed in his ear. "With shooting like this, you are in the safest spot you can be. We need you, and need you alive. Now we have martyrs around whom to rally our cause."

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The nameless man with Gandhi and Nehru knocked on the back door of the tearoom.

"Now we have dead husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Who will tend to their loved ones?"

Gandhi had no time for more protest. Nehru and the other man hauled him to his feet and dragged him away. Soon they were among their people, all running now from the German guns. A bullet struck the back of the unknown man who was helping Gandhi escape. Gandhi heard the slap of the impact, felt the man jerk. Then the strong grip on him loosened as the man fell.

He tried to tear free from Nehru. Before he could, another Indian laid hold of him. Even at that horrid moment, he felt the irony of his predicament. All his life he had championed individual liberty, and here his own followers were robbing him of his. In other circumstances, it might have been funny.

"In here," Nehru shouted. Several people had already broken down the door to a shop and, Gandhi saw a moment later, the rear exit as well. Then he was hustled into the alley behind the shop, and through a maze of lanes that reminded him of the old Delhi, which, unlike its British-designed sister city, was an Indian town through and through.

At last the nameless man with Gandhi and Nehru knocked on the back door of a tearoom. The woman who opened it gasped to recognize her unexpected guests, then pressed her hands together in front of her and stepped aside to let them in. "You will be safe here," the man said, "at least for a while. Now I must see to my own family."

"From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you," Nehru replied as the fellow hurried away. Gandhi said nothing. He was winded, battered, and filled with anguish at the failure of the march and at the suffering it had brought to so many marchers and to their kinsfolk.

The woman sat the two fugitive leaders at a small table in the kitchen, served them tea and cakes. "I will leave you now, best ones," she said gently, "lest those out front wonder why I neglect them for so long."

Gandhi left the cake on his plate. He sipped the tea. Its warmth began to restore him physically, but the wound in his spirit would never heal. "The Armritsar massacre pales beside this," he said, setting down the

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empty cup. "There the British panicked and opened fire. This had nothing of panic about it. Model told me what he would do, and he did it." He shook his head, still hardly believing what he had just been through.

"So he did." Nehru had gobbled his cake like a starving wolf, and ate his companion's when he saw Gandhi did not want it. His once immaculate white jacket and pants were torn, filthy, and blood-spattered; his cap sat awry on his head. But his eyes, usually so somber, were lit with a fierce glow. "And by his brutality, he has delivered himself into our hands. No one now can imagine the Germans have anything but their own interests at heart. We will gain followers all over the country. After this, not a wheel will turn in India."

"Yes, I will declare the satyagraha campaign," Gandhi said. "Noncooperation will show how we reject foreign rule, and will cost the Germans dear because they will not be able to exploit us. The combination of nonviolence and determined spirit will surely shame them into granting us our liberty."

"There — you see." Encouraged by his mentor's rally, Nehru rose and came round the table to embrace the older man. "We will triumph yet."

"So we will," Gandhi said, and sighed heavily. He had pursued India's freedom for half his long life, and this change of masters was a setback he had not truly planned for, even after England and Russia fell. The British were finally beginning to listen to him when the Germans swept them aside. Now he had to begin anew. He sighed again. "It will cost our poor people dear, though."

"Cease firing," Model said. Few good targets were left on Qutb Road; almost all the Indians in the procession were down or had run from the guns.

Even after the bullets stopped, the street was far from silent. Most of the people the German platoon had shot were alive and shrieking; as if he needed more proof, the Russian campaign had taught the field marshal how hard human beings were to kill outright.

Still, the din distressed him, and evidently Lasch as well. "We ought to put them out of their misery," the major said.

"So we should." Model had a happy inspiration. "And I know just how. Come with me."

The two men turned their backs on the carnage and walked around

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the row of armored personnel carriers. As they passed the lieutenant commanding the platoon, Model nodded to him and said, "Well done."

The lieutenant saluted. "Thank you, sir." The soldiers in earshot nodded at one another: nothing bucked up the odds of getting promoted like performing under the commander's eye.

The Germans behind the armored vehicles were not so proud of themselves. They were the ones who had let the march get this big and come this far in the first place. Model slapped his boot with his field marshal's baton. "You all deserve courts-martial," he said coldly, glaring at them. "You know the orders concerning native assemblies, yet there you were tagging along, more like sheepdogs than soldiers." He spat in disgust.

"But sir—," began one of them — a sergeant major, Model saw. He subsided in a hurry when Model's gaze swung his way.

"Speak," the field marshal urged. "Enlighten me — tell me what possessed you to act in the disgraceful way you did. Was it some evil spirit, perhaps? This country abounds with them, if you listen to the natives — as you all too obviously have been."

The sergeant major flushed under Model's sarcasm, but finally burst out, "Sir, it didn't look to me as if they were up to any harm, that's all. The old man heading them up swore they were peaceful, and he looked too feeble to be anything but, if you take my meaning."

Model's smile had all the warmth of a Moscow December night. "And so in your wisdom you set aside the commands you had received. The results of that wisdom you hear now." The field marshal briefly let himself listen to the cries of the wounded, a sound the war had taught him to screen out. "Now then, come with me — yes, you, Sergeant Major, and the rest of your shirkers, too, or those of you who wish to avoid a court."

As he had known they would, they all trooped after him. "There is your handiwork," he said, pointing to the shambles in the street. His voice hardened. "You are responsible for those people lying there — had you acted as you should have, you would have broken up that march long before it ever got so far or so large. Now the least you can do is give those people their release." He set hands on hips, waited.

No one moved. "Sir?" the sergeant major said faintly. He seemed to have become the group's spokesman.

Model made an impatient gesture. "Go on, finish them. A bullet in the back of the head will quiet them once and for all."

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"In cold blood, sir?" The sergeant major had not wanted to understand him before. Now he had no choice.

The field marshal was inexorable. "They — and you — disobeyed Reichs commands. They made themselves liable to capital punishment the moment they gathered. You at least have the chance to atone, by carrying out this just sentence."

"I don't think I can," the sergeant major muttered.

He was probably just talking to himself, but Model gave him no chance to change his mind. He turned to the lieutenant of the platoon that had broken the march. "Place this man under arrest." After the sergeant major had been seized, Model turned his chill, monocled stare at the rest of the reluctant soldiers. "Any others?"

Two more men let themselves be arrested rather than draw their weapons. The field marshal nodded to the others. "Carry out your orders." He had an afterthought. "If you find Gandhi or Nehru out there, bring them to me alive."

The Germans moved out hesitantly. They were no *Einsatzkommandos*, and not used to this kind of work. Some looked away as they administered the first coup de grace; one missed as a result, and had his bullet ricochet off the pavement and almost hit a comrade. But as the soldiers worked their way up Qutb Road, they became quicker, more confident, and more competent. War was like that, Model thought. So soon one became used to what had been unimaginable.

After a while the flat cracks died away, but from lack of targets rather than reluctance. A few at a time, the soldiers returned to Model. "No sign of the two leaders?" he asked. They all shook their heads.

"Very well — dismissed. And obey your orders like good Germans henceforward."

"No further reprisals?" Lasch asked as the relieved troopers hurried away.

"No. let them go. They carried out their part of the bargain, and I will meet mine. I am a fair man, after all, Dieter."

"Very well, sir."

Gandhi listened with undisguised dismay as the shopkeeper babbled out his tale of horror. "This is madness!" he cried.

"I doubt Field Marshal Model, for his part, understands the principle of

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ahimsa," Nehru put in. Neither Gandhi nor he knew exactly where they were: a safe house somewhere not far from the center of Delphi was the best guess he could make. The men who brought the shopkeeper were masked. What one did not know, one could not tell the Germans if captured.

"Neither do you," the older man replied, which was true; Nehru had a more pragmatic nature than Gandhi. Gandhi went on, "Rather more to the point, neither do the British. And Model, to speak to, seemed no different from any high-ranking British military man. His specialty has made him harsh and rigid, but he is not stupid and does not appear unusually cruel."

"Just a simple soldier, doing his job." Nehru's irony was palpable.

"He must have gone insane," Gandhi said; it was the only explanation that made even the slightest sense of the massacre of the wounded. "Undoubtedly he will be censured when the news of this atrocity reaches Berlin, as General Dyer was by the British after Armritsar."

"Such is to be hoped." But again Nehru did not sound hopeful.

"How could it be otherwise, after such an appalling action? What government, what leaders could fail to be filled with humiliation and remorse at it?"

Model strode into the mess. The officers stood and raised their glasses in salute. "Sit, sit," the field marshal growled, using gruffness to hide his pleasure.

An Indian servant brought him a fair imitation of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding: better than they were eating in London these days, he thought. The servant was silent and unsmiling, but Model would only have noticed more about him had he been otherwise. Servants were supposed to assume a cloak of invisibility.

When the meal was done, Model took out his cigar case. The *Waffen-SS* officer on his left produced a lighter. Model leaned forward, puffed a cigar into life. "My thanks, *Brigadeführer*," the field marshal said. He had little use for SS titles of rank, but brigade commander was at least recognizably close to brigadier.

"Sir, it is my great pleasure," Jürgen Stroop declared. "You could not have handled things better. A lesson for the Indians — less than they deserve, too" [he also took no notice of the servant] "and a good one for your men as well. We train ours harshly, too."

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Model nodded. He knew about SS training methods. No one denied the daring of the *Waffen-SS* divisions. No one (except the SS) denied that the *Wehrmacht* had better officers.

Stroop drank. "A lesson," he repeated in a pedantic tone that went oddly with the SS's reputation for aggressiveness. "Force is the only thing the racially inferior can understand. Why, when I was in Warsaw—"

That had been four or five years ago, Model suddenly recalled. Stroop had been a *Brigadeführer* then, too, if memory served; no wonder he was still one now, even after all the hard fighting since. He was lucky not to be a buck private. Imagine letting a pack of desperate, starving Jews chew up the finest troops in the world.

And imagine, afterward, submitting a seventy-five-page operations report bound in leather and grandiosely called "The Warsaw Ghetto Is No More." And imagine, with all that, having the crust to boast about it afterward. No wonder the man sounded like a pompous ass. He *was* a pompous ass, and an inept butcher to boot. Model had done enough butchery before today's work — anyone who fought in Russia learned all about butchery — but he had never botched it.

He did not revel in it, either. He wished Stroop would shut up. He thought about telling the *Brigadeführer* he would sooner have been listening to Gandhi. The look on the fellow's face, he thought, would be worth it. But no. One could never be sure who was listening. Better safe.

THE SHORTWAVE set crackled to life. It was in a secret cellar, a tiny, dark, hot room lit only by the glow of its dial and by the red end of the cigarette in its owner's mouth. The Germans had made not turning in a radio a capital crime. Of course, Gandhi thought, harboring him was also a capital crime. That weighed on his conscience. But the man knew the risk he was taking.

The fellow (Gandhi knew him only as Lal) fiddled with the controls. "Usually we listen to the Americans," he said. "There is some hope of truth from them. But tonight you want to hear Berlin."

"Yes," Gandhi said. "I must learn what action is to be taken against Model."

"If any," Nehru added. He was once again impeccably attired in white, which made him the most easily visible object in the cellar.

"We have argued this before," Gandhi said tiredly. "No government can

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uphold the author of a cold-blooded slaughter of wounded men and women. The world would cry out in abhorrence."

Lal said, "That government controls too much of the world already." He adjusted the tuning knob again. After a burst of static, the strains of a Strauss waltz filled the little room. Lal grunted in satisfaction. "We are a little early yet."

After a few minutes the incongruously sweet music died away. "This is Radio Berlin's English-language channel," an announcer declared. "In a moment, the news program." Another German tune rang out: the *Horst Wessel* song. Gandhi's nostrils flared with distaste.

A new voice came over the air. "Good day. This is William Joyce." The nasal Oxonian accent was that of the archetypal British aristocrat, now vanished from India as well as England. It was the accent that flavored Gandhi's own English, and Nehru's as well. In fact, Gandhi had heard, Joyce was a New York-born rabble-rouser of Irish blood who also happened to be a passionately sincere Nazi. The combination struck the Indian as distressing.

"What did the English used to call him?" Nehru murmured. "Lord Haw-Haw?"

Gandhi waved his friends to silence. Joyce was reading the news, or what the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin wanted to present to English-speakers as the news.

Most of it was on the dull side: a trade agreement between Manchukuo, Japanese-dominated China, and Japanese-dominated Siberia; advances by German-supported French troops against American-supported French troops in a war by proxy in the African jungles. Slightly more interesting was the German warning about American interference in the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

One day soon, Gandhi thought sadly, the two mighty powers of the Old World would turn on the one great nation that stood between them. He feared the outcome. Thinking herself secure behind ocean barriers, the United States had stayed out of the European war. Now the war was bigger than Europe, and the ocean barriers no longer, but highways for her foes.

Lord Haw-Haw droned on and on. He gloated over the fate of rebels hunted down in Scotland: they were publicly hanged. Nehru leaned forward. "Now," he guessed. Gandhi nodded.

But the commentator passed on to unlikely sounding boasts about the

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prosperity of Europe under the New Order. Against his will, Gandhi felt anger rise in him. Were Indians too insignificant to the Reich even to be mentioned?

More music came from the radio: the first bars of the other German anthem, *"Deutschland über alles."* William Joyce said solemnly, "And now, a special announcement from the Ministry for Administration of Acquired Territories. *Reichsminister* Reinhard Heydrich commends Field Marshal Walther Model's heroic suppression of insurrection in India, and warns that his leniency will not be repeated."

"Leniency!" Nehru and Gandhi burst out together, the latter making it into as much of a curse as he allowed himself.

As if explaining to them, the voice on the radio went on, "Henceforward, hostages will be taken at the slightest sound of disorder, and will be executed forthwith if it continues. Field Marshal Model had also placed a reward of fifty thousand rupees on the capture of the criminal revolutionary Gandhi, and twenty-five thousand on the capture of his henchman Nehru."

"Deutschland über alles" rang out again, to signal the end of the announcement. Joyce went on to the next piece of news. "Turn that off," Nehru said after a moment. Lal obeyed, plunging the cellar into complete darkness. Nehru surprised Gandhi by laughing. "I have never before been the henchman of a criminal revolutionary."

The older man might as well not have heard him. "They commended him," he said. "Commended!" Disbelief put the full tally of his years in his voice, which usually sounded much stronger and younger.

"What will you do?" Lal asked quietly. A match flared, dazzling in the dark, as he lit another cigarette.

"They shall not govern India in this fashion," Gandhi snapped. "Not a soul will cooperate with them from now on. We outnumber them a thousand to one; what can they accomplish without us? We shall use that to full advantage."

"I hope the price is not more than the people can pay," Nehru said.

"The British shot us down, too, and we were on our way toward prevailing," Gandhi said stoutly. As he would not have a few days before, though, he added, "So do I."

Field Marshal Model scowled and yawned at the same time. The pot of

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tea that should have been on his desk was nowhere to be found. His stomach growled. A plate of rolls should have been beside the teapot.

"How am I supposed to get anything done without breakfast?" he asked rhetorically (no one was in the office to hear him complain). Rhetorical complaint was not enough to satisfy him. "Lasch!" he shouted.

"Sir?" The aide came rushing in.

Model jerked his chin at the empty space on his desk where the silver tray full of good things should have been. "What's become of what's his name? Naoroji, that's it. If he's home with a hangover, he could have had the courtesy to let us know."

"I will inquire with the liaison officer for native personnel, sir, and also have the kitchen staff send you up something to eat." Lasch picked up a telephone, spoke into it. The longer he talked, the less happy he looked. When he turned back to the field marshal, his expression was a good match for the stony one Model often wore. He said, "None of the locals has shown up for work today, sir."

"What? None?" Model's frown made his monocle dig into his cheek. He hesitated. "I will feel better if you tell me some new hideous malady has broken out among them."

Lasch spoke with the liaison officer again. He shook his head. "Nothing like that, sir — or at least," he corrected himself with the caution that made him a good aide, "nothing Captain Wechsler knows about."

Model's phone rang again. It startled him; he jumped. "*Bitte!*" he growled into the mouthpiece, embarrassed at starting even though only Lash had seen. He listened. Then he growled again, in good earnest this time. He slammed the phone down. "That was our railway officer. Hardly any natives are coming into the station."

The phone rang again. "*Bitte!*" This time it was a swearword. Model snarled, cutting off whatever the man on the other end was saying, and hung up. "The damned clerks are staying out, too," he shouted at Lasch, as if it were the major's fault. "I know what's wrong with the blasted locals, by God — an overdose of Gandhi, that's what."

"We should have shot him down in that riot he led," Lasch said angrily.

"Not for lack of effort that we didn't," Model said. Now that he saw where his trouble was coming from, he began thinking like a General Staff-trained officer again. That discipline went deep in him. His voice was cool and musing as he corrected his aide: "It was no riot, Dieter. That man

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is a skilled agitator. Armed with no more than words, he gave the British fits. Remember that the Führer started out as an agitator, too."

"Ah, but the Führer wasn't above breaking heads to back up what he said." Lasch smiled reminiscently, and raised a fist. He was a Munich man, and wore on his sleeve the hash mark that showed party membership before 1933.

But the field marshal said, "You think Gandhi doesn't? His way is to break them from the inside out, to make his foes doubt themselves. Those soldiers who took courts rather than obey their commanding officer had their heads broken, wouldn't you say? Think of him as a Russian tank commander, say, rather than as a political agitator. He is fighting us every bit as much as the Russians did."

Lasch thought about it. Plainly he did not like it. "A coward's way of fighting."

"The weak cannot use the weapons of the strong," Model shrugged. "He does what he can, and skillfully. But I can make his backers doubt themselves, too: see if I don't."

"Sir?"

"We'll start with the railway workers. They are the most essential to have back on the job, yes? Get a list of names. Cross off every twentieth one. Send a squad to each of those homes, haul the slackers out, and shoot them in the street. If the survivors don't report tomorrow, do it again. Keep at it every day until they go back to work or no workers are left."

"Yes, sir." Lasch hesitated. At last he asked, "Are you sure, sir?"

"Have you a better idea, Dieter? We have a dozen divisions here; Gandhi has the whole subcontinent. I have to convince them in a hurry that obeying me is a better idea than obeying him. Obeying is what counts. I don't care a pfennig as to whether they love me. *Oderint, dum metuant.*"

"Sir?" The major had no Latin.

"'Let them hate, so long as they fear.'"

"Ah," Lasch said. "Yes, I like that." He fingered his chion as he thought. "In aid of which, the Muslims hereabouts like the Hindus none too well. I daresay we could use them to help hunt Gandhi down."

"Now that *I* like," Model said. "Most of our Indian Legion lads are Muslims. They will know people, or know people who know people. And" — the field marshal chuckled cynically — "the reward will do no harm, either. Now get those feelers in motion — and if they pay off, you'll prob-

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ably have earned yourself a new pip on your shoulder boards."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

"My pleasure. As I say, you'll have earned it. So long as things go as they should, I am a very easy man to get along with. Even Gandhi could, if he wanted to. He will end up having caused a lot of people to be killed because he does not."

"Yes, sir," Lasch agreed. "If only he would see that, since we have won India from the British, we will not turn around and tamely yield it to those who could not claim it for themselves."

"You're turning into a political philosopher now, Dieter?"

"Ha! Not likely." But the major looked pleased as he picked up the phone.

"My dear friend, my ally, my teacher, we are losing," Nehru said as the messenger scuttled away from this latest in a series of what were hopefully called safe houses. "Day by day, more people return to their jobs."

Gandhi shook his head, slowly, as if the motion caused him physical pain. "But they must not. Each one who cooperated with the Germans sets back the day of his own freedom."

"Each one who fails to ends up dead," Nehru said dryly. "Most men lack your courage, great-souled one. To them, that carries more weight than the other. Some are willing to resist, but would rather take up arms than the restraint of satyagraha."

"If they take up arms, they will be defeated. The British could not beat the Germans with guns and tanks and planes; how shall we? Besides, if we shoot a German here and there, we give them the excuse they need to strike at us. When one of their lieutenants was waylaid last month, their bombers leveled a village in reprisal. Against those who fight through nonviolence, they have no such justification."

"They do not seem to need one, either," Nehru pointed out.

Before Gandhi could reply to that, a man burst into the hovel where they were hiding. "You must flee!" he cried. "The Germans have found this place! They are coming. Out with me, quick! I have a cart waiting."

Nehru snatched up the canvas bag in which he carried his few belongings. For a man used to being something of a dandy, the haggard life of a fugitive came hard. Gandhi had never wanted much. Now that he had nothing, that did not disturb him. He rose calmly, followed the man who had come to warn them.

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"Hurry!" the fellow shouted as they scambled into his oxcart while the humpbacked cattle watched indifferently with their liquid brown eyes. When Gandhi and Nehru were lying in the cart, the man piled blankets and straw mats over them. He scrambled up to take the reins, saying, "*Inshallah*, we shall be safely away from here before the platoon arrives." He flicked a switch over the backs of the cattle. They lowed indignantly. The cart rattled away.

Lying in the sweltering semidarkness under the concealment the man had draped on him, Gandhi peered through chinks, trying to figure out where in Delhi he was going next. He had played the game more than once these past few weeks, though he knew doctrine said he should not. The less he knew, the less he could reveal. Unlike most men, though, he was confident he could not be made to talk against his will.

"We are using the technique the American Poe called the 'purloined letter,' I see," he remarked to Nehru. "We will be close by the German barracks. They will not think to look for us there."

The younger man frowned. "I did not know we had safe houses there," he said. Then he relaxed, as well as he could when folded into too small a space. "Of course, I do not pretend to know everything there is to know about such matters. It would be dangerous if I did."

"I was thinking much the same myself, though with me as subject of the sentence." Gandhi laughed quietly. "Try as we will, we always have ourselves at the center of things, don't we?"

He had to raise his voice to finish. An armored personnel carrier came rumbling and rattling toward them, getting louder as it approached. The silence when the driver suddenly killed the engine was a startling contrast to the previous racket. Then there was noise again, as soldiers shouted in German.

"What are they saying?" Nehru asked.

"Hush," Gandhi said absently: not from ill manners, but out of the concentration he needed to follow German at all. After a moment he resumed, "They are swearing at a black-bearded man, asking why he flagged them down."

"Why would anyone flag down German sol—," Nehru began, then stopped in abrupt dismay. The fellow who burst into their hiding place wore a bushy black beard. "Now we better get out of—" Again Nehru broke off in mid-sentence, this time because the oxcart driver was throwing off

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the coverings that concealed his two passengers.

Nehru started to get to his feet so he could try to scramble out and run. Too late — a rifle barrel that looked wide as a tunnel was shoved in his face as a German came dashing up to the cart. The big curved magazine said the gun was one of the automatic assault rifles that had wreaked such havoc among the British infantry. A burst would turn a man into bloody hash. Nehru sank back in despair.

Gandhi, less spry than his friend, had only sat up in the bottom of the cart. "Good day, gentlemen," he said to the Germans peering down at him. His tone took no notice of their weapons.

"Down." The word was in such gutturally accented Hindi that Gandhi hardly understood it, but the accompanying gesture with a rifle was unmistakable.

His face a mask of misery, Nehru got out of the cart. A German helped Gandhi descend. "*Danke,*" he said. The soldier nodded gruffly. He pointed the barrel of his rifle — toward the armored personnel carrier.

"My rupees!" the black-beared man shouted.

Nehru turned on him, so quickly he almost got shot for it. "Your thirty pieces of silver, you mean," he cried.

"Ah, a British education," Gandhi murmured. No one was listening to him.

"My rupees," the man repeated. He did not understand Nehru; so often, Gandhi thought sadly, that was at the root of everything.

"You'll get them," promised the sergeant leading the German squad. Gandhi wondered if he was telling the truth. Probably so, he decided. The British had had centuries to build a network of Indian clients. Here but a matter of months, the Germans would need all they could find.

"In." The soldier with a few words of Hindi nodded to the back of the armored personnel carrier. Up close, the vehicle took on a war-battered individuality its kind had lacked when they were just big, intimidating shapes rumbling down the highway. It was bullet-scarred and patched in a couple of places, with sheets of steel crudely welded on.

Inside, the jagged lips of the bullet holes had been hammered down so they did not gouge a man's back. The carrier smelled of leather, sweat, tobacco, smokeless powder, and exhaust fumes. It was crowded, all the more so with the two Indians added to its usual contingent. The motor's roar when it started up challenged even Gandhi's equanimity.

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Not, he thought with uncharacteristic bitterness, that that equanimity had done him much good.

"They are here, sir," Lasch told Model, then, at the field marshal's blank look, amplified: "Gandhi and Nehru."

Model's eyebrow came down toward his monocle. "I won't bother with Nehru. Now that we have him, take him out and give him a noodle" — army slang for a bullet in the back of the neck — "but don't waste my time over him. Gandhi, now, is interesting. Fetch him in."

"Yes, sir," the major sighed. Model smiled. Lasch did not find Gandhi interesting. Lasch would never carry a field marshal's baton, not if he lived to be ninety.

Model waved away the soldiers who escorted Gandhi into his office. Either of them could have broken the little Indian like a stick. "Have a care," Gandhi said. "If I am the desperate criminal bandit you have styled me, I may overpower you and escape."

"If you do, you will have earned it," Model retorted. "Sit, if you care to."

"Thank you." Gandhi sat. "They took Jawaharlal away. Why have you summoned me instead?"

"To talk for a while, before you join him." Model saw that Gandhi knew what he meant, and that the old man remained unafraid. Not that that would change anything, Model thought, although he respected his opponent's courage the more for his keeping it in the last extremity.

"I will talk, in the hope of persuading you to have mercy on my people. For myself I ask nothing."

Model shrugged. "I was as merciful as the circumstances of war allowed, until you began your campaign against us. Since then I have done what I needed to restore order. When it returns, I may be milder again."

"You seem a decent man," Gandhi said, puzzlement in his voice. "How can you so callously massacre people who have done you no harm?"

"I never would have, had you not urged them to folly."

"Seeking freedom is not folly."

"It is when you cannot gain it — and you cannot. Already your people are losing their stomach for — what do you call it? Passive resistance? A silly notion. A passive resister simply ends up dead, with no chance to hit back at his foe."

That hit a nerve, Model thought. Gandhi's voice was less detached as

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he answered, "Satyagraha strikes the oppressor's soul, not his body. You must be without honor or conscience, to fail to feel your victims' anguish."

Nettled in turn, the field marshal snapped, "I have honor. I follow the oath of obedience I swore with the army to the Führer and through him to the Reich. I need consider nothing past that."

Now Gandhi's calm was gone. "But he is a madman! What has he done to the Jews of Europe?"

"Removed them," Model said matter-of-factly; *Einsatzgruppe* B had followed Army Group Central to Moscow and beyond. "They were capitalists or Bolsheviks, and either way enemies of the Reich. When an enemy falls into a man's hands, what else is there to do but destroy him, lest he revive to turn the tables one day?"

Gandhi had buried his face in his hands. Without looking at Model, he said, "Make him a friend."

"Even the British knew better than that, or they would not have held India as long as they did," the field marshal snorted. "They must have begun to forget, though, or your movement would have got what it deserves long ago. You first made the mistake of confusing us with them long ago, by the way." He touched a fat dossier on his desk.

"When was that?" Gandhi asked indifferently. The man was beaten now, Model thought with a touch of pride: he had succeeded where a generation of degenerate, decadent Englishmen had failed. Of course, the field marshal told himself, he had beaten the British, too.

He opened the dossier, riffled through it. "Here we are," he said, nodding in satisfaction. "It was after *Kristallnacht*, eh, in 1938, when you urged the German Jews to play at the same game of passive resistance you were using here. Had they been fools enough to try it, we would have thanked you, you know: it would have let us bag the enemies of the Reich all the more easily."

"Yes, I made a mistake," Gandhi said. Now he was looking at the field marshal, looking at him with such fierceness that for a moment Model thought he would attack him despite advanced age and effete philosophy. But Gandhi only continued sorrowfully, "I made the mistake of thinking I faced a regime ruled by conscience, one that could at the very least be shamed into doing that which is right."

Model refused to be baited. "We do what is right for our *Volk*, for our

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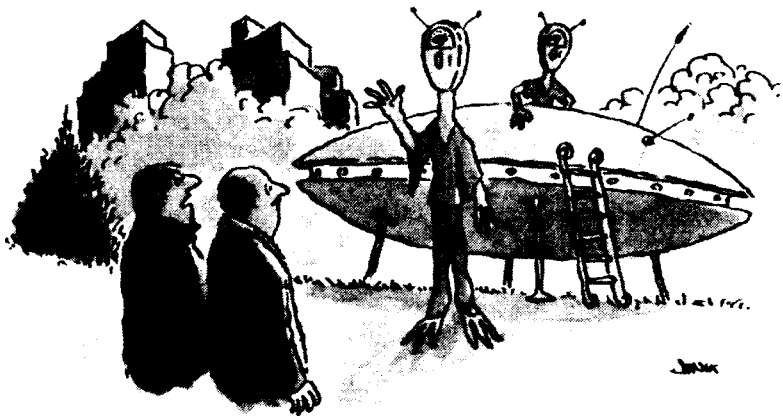
Reich. We are meant to rule, and rule we do — as you see." The field marshal tapped the dossier again. "You could be sentenced to death for this earlier meddling in the affairs of the fatherland, you know, even without these later acts of insane defiance you have caused."

"History will judge us," Gandhi warned as the field marshal rose to have him taken away.

Model smiled then. "Winners write history." He watched the two strapping German guards lead the old man off. "A very good morning's work," the field marshal told Lasch when Gandhi was gone. "What's on the menu for lunch?"

"Blood sausage and sauerkraut, I believe."

"Ah, good. Something to look forward to." Model sat down. He went back to work.



"They seem friendly enough. But still, somehow, I don't like their looks."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

STANDING TALL

WHEN MY beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter, Robyn, was a little past her first birthday, it seemed to me that it was quite time she should be able to walk upright. Therefore, when I caught her propelling herself forward on her little legs, while hanging on to various articles of furniture, I very carefully and gently detached her arms from said articles in order to see what would happen.

What happened was that she promptly sat down with a plop.

I was chagrined and felt (as I do about all problems) that it only required a reasoned discussion of the matter.

"Walk, dear," I said to her. "Move your legs and don't hang on. Do like daddy does. Here, watch daddy. See? Like this."

It did no good. There was no reasoning with her at that age. (Nor pretty much at any age, I eventually found out.)

Then one day, shortly afterward, when I was sitting in the kitchen in the expectation of being fed lunch, Robyn walked in, and since I am not (and never have been) a noticing person, I simply said, "Hello, Robyn."

It was only after several seconds that the truth of the situation forced itself upon me and I said, in astonishment, "You're *walking*."

And so she was. Little Robyn had, in some dim way, discovered that is was easier to walk than to crawl and promptly began to walk. She never crawled again — which brings me to the point of this essay.

Human beings have always looked for some clear distinction between themselves and all other animals (out of self importance and self love, I presume).

Theologians found the perfect solution. Human beings are made in the image of God, while other animals are not. This brings on the

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difficulty that it limits God to imagine him as having any corporeal shape at all, let alone that of a man, so that statement is modified to "in the *spiritual* image of God." In other words, man has a soul and other animals do not. This is an irrefutable statement — and also an unprovable one. Therefore, those of us who find it difficult to rely on faith alone, but who want a difference to exist anyway, must find a physical and demonstrable one.

For instance, other animals have tails, but we don't. Other animals have body hair, but we don't. Other animals can't talk, but we can. Other animals have little brains, but we have big ones.

Somehow, though, it's not as simple as it seems. Bears, guinea pigs, and gorillas have no tails. Elephants, hippopotami, and dolphins have no body hair. Animals may not speak English but they communicate. Elephants and whales have bigger brains than we do.

Of all the separating characteristics, however, bipedality — the ability to walk on two legs — seemed the most attractive. The Greek philosopher, Plato, thought it was, but he had to eliminate birds, which were all bipedal. He therefore defined the human being as a "featherless biped."

Whereupon his fellow philosopher, Diogenes, plucked a chicken and held it up, saying, "Here is Plato's man!"

This is a nonsensical counter argument, however. Just because a particular chicken has its feathers removed doesn't mean that the abstract concept "bird" doesn't have feathers. Diogenes might have brought in a kangaroo, or a jerboa, or a tyrannosaurus rex, if these had been available, and that would have been a genuine refutation of the definition.

Still, Plato's feeling about bipedality was, in my opinion, correct. Let's think about it.

Animals that are bipedal usually are restricted to two legs because two others have been devoted to some other (and preferred) form of locomotion that does not involve legs primarily. Most birds are designed to be flyers, and walking, running or hopping is strictly secondary. The penguin is designed to be a swimmer, and walking is secondary.

But what about non-flying birds like ostriches, where walking or running is the *only* means of locomotion — and a good one since they can run as fast as horses when pressed? In such cases, the body is designed for it. The body is essentially horizontal, with as much sticking behind the legs as in front so that the center of gravity is above the legs.

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This is also true of bipedal reptiles and mammals. Think of the tyrannosaurus and the kangaroo. Each has a long tail for balance. In that case, the only way the body's center of gravity can be brought above the two hind legs is to tip the entire body into a vertical position.

Some tailless animals actually do this. Bears and the chimpanzees can stand upright on their hind legs and can even walk about in this fashion, but they are clearly uncomfortable in doing so. They (Like baby Robyn) feel much better if they allow their forelimbs to share the work. And, unlike Robyn, they never get to the stage where it becomes comfortable to use their hind legs only.

Plato would have done better, therefore, to define the human being as a "tailless, habitual biped." In that case, Diogenes would have found it much more difficult to find a counter-example. (He might have cut the wings off a penguin —but penguins, even though they walk upright like a human being, are obviously clumsy at it and even without wings would prefer to belly-whop on the ice if they can.)

What makes it possible for human beings to walk *comfortably* on two legs?

It is that the spinal column, just above the pelvis, bends backward in human beings. It assumes a shallow S-shape in us, and can therefore remain generally vertical without trouble. It adds a little spring and bounce to the human walk. No other organism has that backward bend to the spine in the small of the back, so that while some tailless animals can walk bipedally at need; none do so comfortably, let alone preferably.

How did the human spine develop that backward bend?

Presumably there is some advantage to getting on your hind legs. It lifts your head and major sense organs higher so that you can spot food, or danger, at a greater distance. It also frees your forelimbs for temporary duty for something other then support, so that you can hold food, say, or a baby.

Various ape-like creatures, some millions of years ago, would raise themselves to their hind legs temporarily for the advantages that would bring them; and those who could do so with reasonable comfort were, in the long run, better off. A particular species of ape experienced a random mutation that happened to make the spine a bit more bendable in the right place, and that improved his chances of survival. Any further change in that direction would then be selected for, and eventually you would have a tailless organism that could walk on two legs easily and comfortably.

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Any such ape would then be closer to us in a key anatomical respect than it would be to any other ape, living or extinct. Such an organism would then be a "hominid" (from a Latin word for "man"), rather than a "pongid" (from a Congolese word for "ape").

Now we can return to the point where we left off in last month's essay, which, as you'll recall, was the 20th step on the road to humanity.

20) 5,000,000 B.P. ("Before the Present"). The earliest hominids were first identified by an Australian-South African anthropologist, Raymond Arthur Dart (b. 1893), to whom a skull, human looking except for its extraordinarily small size, was brought from a South African limestone quarry in 1924. He recognized it as belonging to a primitive ancestor of humanity and, in 1925, suggested it be called "Australopithecus" from classical words meaning "southern ape."

This is actually a bad name for three reasons. First, it is a mixture of Latin and Greek. "Australo" comes from the Latin "auster" meaning "south," and "pithecus" comes from the Greek "pithekos" meaning "ape." These Latin-Greek mixtures are frowned on by purists.

Then, the use of the Latin "auster" instead of the Greek "notos" somehow gives the impression that these early hominids lived in Australia (which is also named for "south" for obvious reasons) and that isn't so.

Finally, this primitive creature was *not* an ape but a hominid and should have been called "Notoanthropus" or something like that. However it is hard to tell from a skull alone that an organism walks erect and was therefore a hominid. That came only after fragments of thigh bones and pelvises were uncovered.

Since 1924, other remains have been found of such hominids, and it is now believed that they existed in perhaps four different species, lumped together as "australopithecines."

The best remains of the earliest of these species was found in 1974, when a large fraction of the skeleton of an australopithecine was located in east-central Africa by an American anthropologist, Donald Johanson. It seemed to be the skeleton of a woman so it was nicknamed "Lucy." It was at least three million years old and possibly four. We might speculate that the very first australopithecines, scarcely to be differentiated from the ancestral pongid, may have lived five million years ago.

Lucy is an example of "Australopithecus afarensis," because Afars is the name of the territory where the remains were found. Apparent-

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ly, east-central Africa was the cradle of humanity.

A. afarensis must have looked very much like a chimpanzee. The adults were no taller than a chimpanzee, and slighter in build. They seem to have ranged between three and four feet in height and weighed perhaps 65 pounds.

The brain, too, was no larger than a chimpanzee's, about 380 grams, or ¼ the size of our own. A. afarensis probably lived much as chimpanzees do and, from its hipbones, toes and fingers, there is a feeling it spent much of its time in trees. It certainly couldn't speak, and it must have been largely a vegetarian though it may have scavenged meat from animals that had been killed and left over by the true carnivores.

However, since A. afarensis had a chimpanzee brain in a body half the weight of a chimpanzee, its brain/body ratio was twice that of a chimpanzee. The first hominid may already have been more intelligent than any ape. Even more important, A. afarensis walked on its hind legs as easily as we do. I have seen it suggested that this made it possible for it to scavenge. The females were not forced to remain near their helpless young, but could carry those young in one arm and run after the carnivores, ready to eat whatever they left over.

This would have been all the more important if A. afarensis was already beginning to lose body hair so that the young could not hold on to the hair, allowing the organism to run freely on all fours. (We don't know at what stage in hominid evolution body hair was lost.)

Also, it is possible that the young were routinely held in the left arm to have them nearer the beating of the heart. This would more closely resemble the environment in the uterus, and experience might have showed that the child would remain more quiet there. It may be for this reason that hominids used their free right hand for other purposes and developed the overwhelming right-handedness that characterizes human beings (but not other animals) today.

21) 3,000,000 B.P. By 3 million years ago, A. afarensis was definitely on the way out. It must surely have become extinct by 2,500,000 years ago. Even so, it cannot be reckoned a failure. It is possible that the species survived for 2½ million years, and it seems extremely doubtful that our own species will do as well.

However, A. afarensis didn't disappear altogether. They had left descendants who, through the slow process of evolution, had become sufficiently different to be considered a new species. By 3 million

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years ago, "Australopithecus africanus" existed.

A. africanus was very much like A. afarensis. It may have been no taller, but it was a little more heavily built and it may have weighed as much as 90 pounds in some cases. The brain, too, had increased in size and was now almost the size of that of a modern gorilla, say 500 grams, or about 1/3 the weight of our brain.

Most of the remains of A. africanus have been found in southeastern Africa. The first findings by Dart had been of A. africanus, and they deserved the species name at the time, for they were the first hominid remains to be found in Africa. [It also took some of the curse off the prefix "Australo-".]

22] 2,500,000 B.P. The evolution of the australopithecines is very hard to follow. No intact skeletons have been found, only scattered remains. We can never tell whether a particular scrap happens to be typical of the particular australopithecines of that time and place, or if it happens to be of an individual that is atypical for some reason.

It had been thought, for instance, that A. africanus had given rise to a third australopithecine species which had in turn given rise to a fourth. But then, in the summer of 1986, a 2.5 million-year-old skull was found with a prominent ridge on top, to which, undoubtedly, powerful jaw muscles had once been attached.

Anthropologists are not certain what this find means. It is called "the Black Skull" from its color. It seems to be an australopithecine beyond doubt, and the best bet right now is that it descended from A. africanus and, in its turns, split up into the remaining two australopithecine species simultaneously not long after 2.5 million years ago.

One of these species is "Australopithecus robustus," which is so called because it is larger than the earlier australopithecines and has thicker bones.

Its height may have topped five feet at best and it weighed up to 110 pounds. Its brain showed another small increase in size and may have weighed about 550 grams. Most of the remains of A. robustus have been found in southern Africa.

Somehow allied to A. robustus is another large australopithecine that appeared at about the same time. It may be just a variety of A. robustus or it may be a descendant, or it may have evolved along with A. robustus from the Black Skull. We don't know enough yet to be able to say.

This fourth and last australopithecine is "Australopithecus boisei." Its remains were discovered in east central Africa in 1959 by an

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expedition sponsored and funded by a British businessman named Charles Boise — which accounts for its species name.

A. boisei is the largest of the australopithecines, and some may have been as large and as heavy as a modern human being of average size. Its brain was no larger than that of A. robustus, however.

Brain growth in these larger australopithecines may not have matched the body growth so they may have been less intelligent than the smaller ones. That may explain why they were an evolutionary dead end. They died out about a million years ago and left no descendants. For about 4 million years there had been australopithecines in eastern and southern Africa, and then they were gone.

But not entirely.

23| 2,000,000 B.P. About 2 million years ago, there was a hominid that we don't consider to be an australopithecine, but that clearly evolved from one. We can't be sure exactly which one because we don't have any remains, as yet, of the intermediate steps.

Most anthropologists seem to think that A. africanus split into two lineages, one leading to the Black Skull, to A. robustus, A. Boisei and the dead end. The other led to the non-australopithecine and to all the species that followed — including us. That may well be so, but we can use more evidence and someday we may have it.

The new hominid is sufficiently like us to be placed in the same genus with us — Homo. In other words, genus Homo, of which we are part, seems to have come into being 2 million years ago.

The full name of the earliest hominid of genus Homo is "Homo habilis," where "habilis" is from a Latin word meaning "skillful." (The English word "able" is a descendant of "habilis.")

H. habilis was not as large as the larger australopithecines. In fact, in the summer of 1986, a set of fossil remains of H. habilis was discovered that were some 1.8 million years old. It was the first time that both skull fragments and limb bones of the same individual had been located, and they seemed to represent a small, light adult about 3½ feet tall and with arms that were surprisingly long. It was more like an australopithecine than had been thought, but it's hard to go by one specimen. It may have been an undernourished runt.

In any case, though H. habilis may have been small, he had a more rounded head and a larger brain, which may easily have weighed 700 grams, nearly half that of a present day human being. He had thinner skull bones and possi-

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bly he possessed the beginnings of "Broca's convolution" in his brain, so that if he could not talk, he could at least make a greater variety of sounds than the australopithecines could. His hands were more like our modern hands, and his feet seemed to be completely modern. His jaws were less massive so that his face looked less ape-like. On the whole, you can see why he was Homo and not Australopithecus.

And why "skillful"?

Tool using and tool making are not a primarily human ability. Chimpanzees can use branches with which to threaten an enemy. They can strip the leaves from a twig and use it to probe for termites. They can crumple up leaves to use as sponges. Undoubtedly, the australopithecines could do anything chimpanzees could do and more too. They may even have cracked rocks, on occasion, to make use of sharp edges.

It was H. habilis, however, who finally got to using his hands to their full potential. They had been freed when the first hominid became bipedal 2 or 3 million years before, and they had been growing more useful ever since. Perhaps the necessity of dealing with only two limbs in locomotion had freed increasing volumes of the enlarging brain for the delicate control of the fingers.

In any case, H. habilis was the first organism of any kind to make a big thing out of chipping and flaking different kinds of rocks to make tools of various kinds for chopping, scraping, cutting and so on. With H. habilis and his skillful hands, in other words, came the birth of technology.

As in the case of the australopithecines, the remains of H. habilis are to be found in east-central and southern Africa, so that both in space and time, it overlapped the larger australopithecines.

Homo habilis, with its rock tools and larger brains, was more formidable than the australopithecines. Indeed, H. habilis seemed to have been the first hominids to become hunters rather than scavengers, and the hunting may have included the australopithecines. It may be that H. habilis and its immediate descendants finished off the last australopithecines so that for the last million years all hominids without exception have been part of the genus Homo.

24) 1,600,000 B.P. By 1.6 million years ago, H. habilis was gone, even before the australopithecines were. The australopithecines really vanished, however, and became extinct. H. habilis had evolved.

It had become a new species, "Homo erectus," which was about as large and as heavy as modern

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human beings. H. erectus was the first hominid to attain a height of as much as 6 feet and to weigh over 150 pounds. (That is why I distrust that small specimen of H. habilis. Can the body have expanded so much in a mere two hundred thousand years?)

The brain was larger, too, with a weight of 800 to 1100 grams. The upper limit is ¾ the size of the modern human brain.

H. erectus made much better stone tools than had been built before and were enormously successful hunters, taking on the biggest animals they could find — even the mammoth.

Undoubtedly, the last australopithecines must have fallen prey to H. erectus. If a few specimens of relatively unchanged H. habilis remained, off they went, too. Homo erectus, between 1 million and 300,000 years ago, was the only hominid species in existence.

H. erectus made two particularly enormous advances.

In the first place, all the hominids, for perhaps as much as four million years, had been confined to Africa and to the southeastern half of that continent at that. H. erectus was the first hominid to expand that range significantly. About 500,000 years ago (my guess), it moved off into the rest of Africa, into Europe, into Asia and even into the Indonesian islands.

In fact, the first discoveries of remains of H. erectus were in Java, where the Dutch anthropologist Marie Eugene Dubois (1858-1940) discovered a skullcap, a femur and two teeth in 1894. No hominid with so small a brain had yet been discovered, and Dubois named it "Pithecanthropus erectus," (Greek for "erect ape-man").

A similar find was made near Peking, beginning in 1927, by a Canadian anthropologist, Davidson Black (1884-1934). He named his find "Sinanthropus pekinensis" (Greek for "China-man from Peking").

Eventually, it was recognized that both sets of remains along with some others were all of the same species and deserved to belong to genus Homo. Dubois's term, erectus, was kept even though hominids had been walking erect for as long as 3 million years before H. erectus had evolved. This, however, was not known in Dubois's time.

The second great advance made by H. erectus was the use of fire. Traces of campfires have been found in settlements of H. erectus. It is possible that fire had been made use of, in a kind of casual and opportunistic way, before H. erectus. H. erectus, however, was the first to use it systematically. It was the greatest technological advance since

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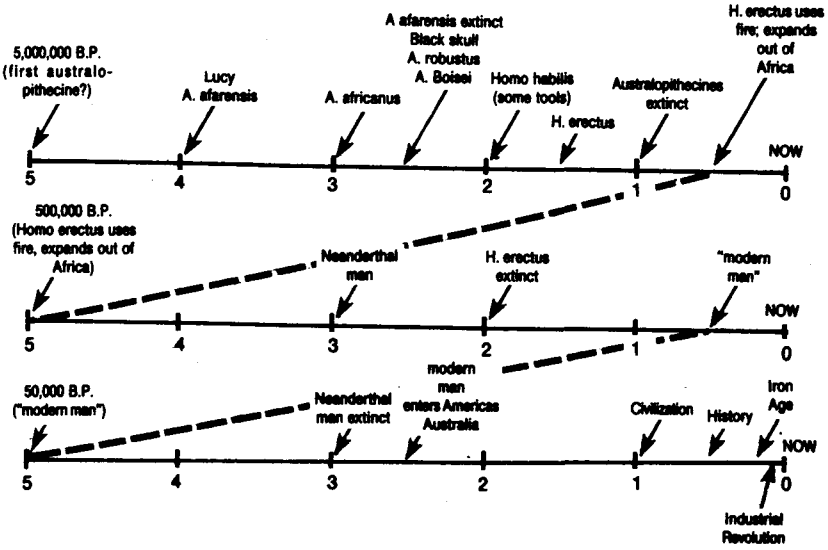

the making of stone tools.

25) 300,000 B.P. Hominids who were recognizably H. erectus in characteristics may have lived as recently as 200,000 years ago, perhaps even longer, but they had been evolving in the direction of still larger brain size. By 300,000 years ago, hominids had been developed with body and brain size as large as ours.

The first trace of such hominids was located in 1856 in the Neander Valley ("Neanderthal" in German) in Germany. Such hominids were therefore called "Neanderthal men." Their skulls were distinctly less human than our own. They had pronounced eyebrow ridges, large teeth, protruding jaws, a smoothly receding chin — all rather resembling H. erectus. They were stockier than we are, and more muscular. Their brains were as large as ours, or a few percent larger, but were differently proportioned, heavier in back, and lighter in front.

They were at first termed "Homo neanderthalensis," but they were so like us everywhere but in a few details of the skull, that they were finally recognized as being of our species: "Homo sapiens" ("wise man" in Latin). And why not? There may even be evidence of their having interbred with "modern man."

Still, they are thought of as a subspecies and they are now termed

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"Homo sapiens neanderthalensis." In their early years H. sapiens n. must have overlapped in time and place with those H. erectus hominids who remained. If so, the Neanderthals must certainly have wiped them out. From about 200,000 years ago till about 50,000 years ago, H. sapiens n. were the only hominids alive and existed all over Europe, Asia, and Africa.

26) 50,000 B.P. "Modern man" is "Homo sapiens sapiens," presumably an offshoot of the Neanderthals. H. sapiens s. is taller, more slender and less muscular then H. sapiens n. His brain is a tiny bit smaller but is larger in the forepart, which, we are free to think (but don't really know), gives us an intellectual advantage and makes us better able to indulge in abstract thought and elaborate speech.

Between 50,000 and 30,000 years ago, H. sapiens n. and H. sapiens s. coexisted, but by the latter date, intermarriage and, probably, slaughter, had put an end to the Neanderthals; and for thirty thousand years we have been the only variety of hominid that has existed.

About 25,000 years ago, H. sapiens s. extended the human range again, penetrating the Americas and Australia where, till then, no hominid had ever stepped foot. By 1,000 years ago, human beings were living on every substantial piece of land except for Antarctica.

About 10,000 years ago, H. sapiens s. began to practice agriculture, to herd animals, and to build cities — the beginning of civilization.

About 5,000 years ago, writing was invented by the Sumerians — the beginning of history. Metallurgy followed.

By 3,500 years ago, iron came to be smelted and the age of large empires began.

By 500 years ago, gunpowder, artillery and the printing press were in full swing so that the worst and best of modern times were upon us.

By 220 years ago, the steam-engine was on the way and with it the Industrial Revolution.

By 40 years ago, nuclear weapons came into being, and by 30 years ago, the space age began — and here we are, possibly at the beginning of a new and vast extension of range, and possibly at the point of ending the hominid story altogether, five million years after it began.

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The immaculate conception and the spiritual perfection of Mary, mother of Jesus, are ideas that have occupied theologians through the centuries. Dean Whitlock here offers a twist that may not have occurred to many theologians, and he does it in the framework of a warm, compelling and very human story.

MIRIAM, MESSIAH

By Dean Whitlock

THE BABY WAS DEAD. Hanani cut the cord quickly and handed the limp form to Miriam. Then she turned back to the laboring woman and began to massage her stomach.

"Push," she said firmly. "You're not done yet."

"What is it?" the mother asked. She gasped then and clutched at Hanani's hands. Her face shone with sweat and lamplight.

Rachael, Miriam's eldest sister and her mother's helper here, held the woman up on the birthing stool.

"Later, Adah," she said. "Push now."

The woman began a wail, a deep keening note that blocked her breath and filled the dark corners of the room with pain. Rachael held her, and Hanani massaged deeply. Outside, a lonely voice took up the keening.

Miriam washed the dead child. It was a girl, tiny, dark-haired, perfect. She wiped it clean and wrapped it in the swaddling clothes as though it

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were alive. She held it to her and closed her eyes against the keening. She felt the tiny bones beneath her fingers. She felt her fingers grow warm. She felt her hands grow strong. She stroked the baby's breast, stroking life.

It cried.

Rachael and Hanani turned and looked at her. Adah's keening weakened, then, with a final cry that echoed her daughter, she arched high against Rachael's strong hands. The afterbirth slid from her into the clay pot below the stool. She sank back, silent, staring at the wailing child in Miriam's hands.

Miriam came forward and offered it to her. She took it with trembling hands and held it to her breast. The baby found her nipple and began to suck.

"It's a girl," Miriam said quietly.

"Ah." Adah's reply was almost another cry. But she watched the nursing child, and her face settled. "At least it is alive."

Hanani looked once at Miriam, then went to the door. She spoke briefly. The keening outside stopped. There was one joyous cry. Then the father and grandmother passed by her into the house to hover over the mother and child. Rachael helped Adah off the stool and onto a mat near the smoking fire.

Hanani began to clean up. Miriam and Rachael helped, their part over. The father came over and soberly offered Hanani her fee. Which she took with a nod. Few enough in Nazareth had silver to pay. Usually they went home with cucumbers or a basket of barley. And they were often paid less for daughters, even though their word was the same.

The man turned back to his wife, watching from a few feet away as she crooned to the nursing baby. He kept his hands behind his back, as though he might be tempted to caress her. For thirty days she would be unclean.

Hanani spoke briefly to the grandmother, and they took up the stool and the pot and the herbs and left. The streets were beginning to brighten with early dawn. The air was chill. Miriam took a deep breath and held it. Her hands shook, fingers still warm.

They came to Rachael's husband's house, and she left them. Then Hanani and Miriam walked alone through the narrow street, past the well, across the empty square, and into the alley that held their own home.

Hanani spoke once.

"What did you do with the child?" she said.

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"I cleaned and wrapped it, Mother," Miriam replied. "Then I held it."

Hanani stopped and stared closely at her in the growing dawn.

"Make me no miracles," she said firmly. "We've religion enough in our house."

"I merely held it."

"Let it be just that."

And she walked on.

Later that morning, after too little sleep and a hurried meal, Miriam took a basket of food into the hills for her father and brother. It was a long walk, for their tiny plot was one among the least of Nazareth. Shimeon, her father, had been one of many sons. But there was enough barley and wheat and a few vegetables. And a bit of pasture for their small herd. When the goats were with kid, the men stayed in the hills with them.

The land was alive with spring. Flowers spotted the hillsides. Birds called among the olives near town. The plowed fields showed a young beard of pale green. The rainy season had yet to pass, and the rugged land was wet and fresh. Miriam swung the basket gently as she walked, humming.

But when she came to their small pasture, she saw no sign of her father and brother. She called. Only the birds replied. Birds and the barking of a jackal. The winding hills gave no view. The men could be down any gully or ravine.

She climbed the pasture, calling again. As she neared the top, she saw a vulture turning its slow watch in the sky, and heard again the bark of the jackal. She followed the sound, and the vulture soared with her. She began to worry. Then she heard the high bleating of a kid. She dropped the basket and began to run.

They were trapped in a steep fold in the land, a nanny and kid hobbled by rank growth and the kid's spindly legs. Three growing jackals circled behind as Miriam came near. The nanny spun desperately, trying to keep between them and her kid. But one hind leg hung uselessly, torn at the hock. Her tongue hung along her jaw. Only the kid had strength to cry.

Miriam picked up a large stone and threw it at the jackals, yelling. They growled and slunk farther back. The second stone hit with a dull thump, and one ran. The others followed. The nanny watched them, flanks

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heaving, then sank to her side in the dirt.

Miriam knelt beside her. The kid pushed under her arm and nuzzled at its mother's side. The nanny tried to lift her head. Miriam touched the hot flank. Ran her hand down the injured leg. She felt the strange, familiar warmth start in her fingers.

And pulled back, remembering her mother's words.

"Mary," a voice said behind her, "do you still doubt?"

She turned. A man stood there, or the semblance of a man, young and lean, with dark hair that curled into a golden beard.

"No, Gabriel," she said.

"They why did you draw back?"

"There was a stillbirth last night—"

"I know."

"And my mother told me—"

"I know."

She looked down at her hands, resting in her lap. They seemed strange to her, the warmth a foreign thing, not of herself. "I do not want to disobey my mother," she said.

"Ah." Gabriel knelt beside her, as a man would. As her brother Shmuel would, talking of the weather to another shepherd. But the sun shone on his hair and beard, making a haze around his face.

"Would you disobey your father?" he asked.

She kept her eyes down, fearing tears.

"Look up, Mary," he said.

She raised her eyes, though she found it hard to look into his.

"Now look what lies before you. How do you hesitate?"

She knew she had no answer. She reached out and touched the goat. She felt her hands grow strong. She rubbed the injured leg, and felt the skin heal beneath her palm. The nanny bleated once and stood, nearly knocking her over. The kid rushed under its legs and began to nurse. Miriam had a sudden vision of the mother and child of the night before. She sighed. Despite her mother's words, it felt right.

"It is a wondrous thing, Mary." Gabriel smiled and stood. He offered his hand, and she took it, rising to stand beside him. He towered over her.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" she asked. "I'm not Greek."

"So you'll get used to it," he said. "Your people will call you many things, but 'Mary' most of all. Holy Mary. God's Handmaiden. Queen of the Jews."

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She laughed and shook her head.

"Queen? Midwife, maybe."

"That, too," he said. "They will all be your children. Do you doubt?"

She looked at the goat, stroked its smooth head. It pushed against her, butting gently.

"When?" she asked. "I will be a woman soon. I will have a husband and children. My own children. And we will have fields and goats and a home in Nazareth. How will the people call me 'Queen' then?"

"There will be a sign."

"There was a sign last night. My mother and sister ignored it. And here today, with no one to see."

"Miracles need no witness, Mary."

"I will be Queen of the Goats."

"Mary." He touched her head with his wide hand. She stilled.

"These were signs for you, to strengthen your own heart," he said. "For your people there will be another sign. When you have come to your womanhood. And that will be soon enough."

"Yes, Master," she said quietly.

The touch lifted.

"Miriam." Shmuel's cry broke the air. She looked up, and Gabriel was gone. Instead, her brother came stumbling down the steep side of the gully, kicking dirt and stones before him.

"You found them," he said. His voice was surly, almost accusation.

"Yes," she said. "I heard jackals and came."

"They're all right?" He inspected the nanny and kid closely.

"Yes."

"Troublemaker, this one." He cuffed the nanny lightly on the head. "She wanders. As though God Himself had watch over her." He turned suddenly, frowning.

"Who was it you were talking to?" he asked.

"What?" Miriam looked down. Shmuel was thirteen now. He had been bar mitzvahed last month and, with sudden manhood, had taken to treating her like a child. She was but twelve, and not yet a woman. She had learned to look down, as she would to her father.

"I heard you talking," he said. "Who was it?"

And she remembered Gabriel's promise. She raised her head, queenly.

"The Angel Gabriel," she told him. "He speaks to me."

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Shmuel cuffed her cheek, as he had the goat. "Troublemaker. Watch whom you speak to out here. Have you got my dinner?"

Miriam hesitated, and the moment passed. Without thinking, she dropped her eyes.

"I left it in the field," she said. "When I heard the jackals."

"Pray they haven't found it," he said. "I'm hungry." He grabbed a horn and pulled the goat toward the mouth of the gully. After a few steps, she went on her own, the kid prancing after. Shmuel followed them out. Miriam had to run to catch up.

"Where's Father?" she asked.

"In town," Shmuel replied. "With the rabbi. Our father is a holy man." He said it nodding, a callow statement that he approved their father's infatuation with the Law.

"Yes," Miriam said simply. She knew her mother's mind on the subject. Shimeon spent many of his days arguing among the group that sat with the rabbi in the square.

They found the basket where she had let it fall, and Shmuel took his share. Then Miriam went back to Nazareth to find her father.

She heard him first, pronouncing some truth in his high voice. Then she saw him, standing beside the rabbi, finger raised, narrow jaw thrust out. Several men interrupted him, and his speech became an argument. She hesitated in the shadow of the narrow street, afraid to break in. Then the rabbi raised his hands, and the men quieted.

"To kill a scorpion," he said, "you must first catch it. That is hunting. Hunting on the Sabbath is forbidden."

"You could cover it with a pot," one man grumbled.

"That is catching it," Shimeon stated before the rabbi could open his mouth. "Catching is hunting, and hunting is forbidden."

The argument surged.

Miriam listened with growing impatience. Next they would invite the scorpion to dinner. For a moment she wished she were Gabriel and could walk into the group to tell them what God really intended. And suddenly she stepped into the sunlight and walked toward them. *Gabriel, no,* she thought. But her feet carried her forward. Her fingers burned.

The rabbi noticed her first.

"Shimeon," he said loudly. The talkers ceased. "Here is your daughter, is it not?"

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Shimeon turned, mouth caught open. He blinked at Miriam.

"Why, yes," he said. "My daughter."

"She had brought your dinner, I would guess." The rabbi gestured to her. "Come. Young Miriam, is it?"

She stepped forward.

"Yes, Rabbi," she said. Her tongue felt thick. She took a deep breath. And found herself speaking.

"Rabbi," she said, "it's true that hunting is forbidden, but a scorpion is not game. Would you sleep with an adder or lie down with lions because they entered your house on the Sabbath? That would be suicide, and suicide is forbidden on any day."

She stopped. The men around her stared, but she didn't see them. Her own words amazed her. She would have thought someone else spoke them, but for the dryness in her throat. Then she noticed her father. His mouth worked. His heavy brow rose and fell in a mix of anger and embarrassment. She felt blood rush to her face. She wanted to run away.

But the rabbi laughed.

"So, you'd have us sweep the beast out the door," he said to Miriam.

She flushed again. And her father finally found his voice.

"But," he stammered, "but that would be housework."

"When it comes to housework," the rabbi said dryly, "our wives and daughters usually know how best to read the Law. Give your father his dinner, child. He needs to regain his strength."

The eloquence had left her. Miriam thrust the basket into Shimeon's hands, mumbled something polite to the rabbi, and hurried away. Sudden laughter followed her from the square.

No more signs, she said to the shadows in the alley. *No more signs, Gabriel.* But beneath her confusion, she felt anger. Her words had been right. And she wanted them to listen to her.

THERE WERE no more signs. The dry season came; the grain ripened in the fields. They slaughtered the kid she had saved, and ate the meat on Rosh Hashanah. Shimeon spent more and more of his time in the square. Her mother birthed the neighbor's children and kept the house.

And Miriam outgrew her old robe and donned one passed down from her sister. Her voice took on a softer note. And one night near spring, as

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she lay awake in their dark room, listening to her father snore and wondering at the new tenderness in her breasts, she felt dampness between her legs and knew she had become a woman.

She rose quietly and cleaned herself and found the cloths her mother had given her months before. And as she lay back to sleep, she felt familiar warmth spread up her fingers and through her hands and into her whole body. She remembered Gabriel's words in the narrow ravine, felt the power revealed in his voice.

The sign would come, as he said. She shivered, imagining fire and flood and the voice of the Lord echoing over the alleys of Nazareth. She imagined facing the men in the square, with Gabriel beside her. She imagined them listening, all laughter lost in the strength flowing from her hands. She felt exhilaration, and not a little fear. She lay awake with these thoughts till dawn lit the narrow doorway.

But Gabriel did not come that day, nor the next. And her mother, wise in these things, took a single look at her that morning and laughed.

"Well, Shimeon," she said. "You must find a husband for our daughter."

Shimeon looked up from his breakfast and blinked at Hanani in confusion.

"What?" he said. "A husband? Our Miriam?" He looked at her, squinting in the dim light.

Miriam blushed and looked down. She felt her breasts pushing against the coarse cloth of her robe, felt the soft cloths pressing between her thighs. Felt most of all the eyes of her family pressing against her. At that moment her visions of power left her.

Hanani came over and took her daughter's hand in her large hands. She kissed Miriam's forehead.

"Our daughter is a woman now, Shimeon. It's time she had a husband."

Shimeon rubbed his hand along his narrow jaw.

"Well," he said. "A husband. The Lord be praised. I'll talk to the rabbi. I'm sure he can suggest a proper young man."

"Yes," Hanani said, laughing, "talk to your rabbi. And I will talk to the mothers in this town. We will find a good man for you, Daughter."

"At least she's pretty," said Brother Shmuel. "We won't need so large a dowry."

"Shmuel!" Hanani spun around and glared at him. "Miriam will have a proper dowry. No daughter of mine will go begging for a man."

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"Now, Hanani," Shimeon said, raising his open hand like the rabbi, "I'm sure he meant it as a compliment. Yes, Son? Come now, the planting."

He rose and gestured Shmuel to the door.

"Respect your sister," he said. "When you go seeking a wife of your own, you'll understand."

The two men left. Hanani turned back to Miriam and took her shoulders.

"I have silver from my work, Daughter, and your father will happily part with some goats and grain. Pay no attention to Shmuel's teasing."

But Miriam had no thoughts for Shmuel's words, or for her father's goats. *Husband* echoed in her ears. A husband, a family — a life away from the small house she had known since birth. A new home. She tried to imagine the man her father would find. And saw instead Gabriel's fine face, haloed with golden hair. Suddenly there were two paths before her, and she wished to follow both. She felt tears start in her eyes.

Hanani saw them and misunderstood. She drew Miriam close, pressed her daughter's face into her warm breast.

"Ah, my daughter," she said softly, "husbands aren't so awful. Your father is a good man and will find you another good man. In time you will even love him."

Miriam shook her head and cried into the folds of her mother's robes.

Her period passed, and still Gabriel did not come to her. Nor did her father find a husband.

"These things take time," he muttered when Hanani pressed him.

Miriam found herself waiting with mixed hope and dread each evening when he came home. At night she had dreams of men — men loving her, men bowing as she walked among them — the dreams flashed from one scene to the other, following the confusion of her desire.

Finally she went off by herself one day, to question the two faces of Miriam that lived inside her.

Nazareth seemed empty. It was near Passover, and all who could afford to leave were on the road to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast there. The groups of people she passed spoke Aramaic and Greek. Those few who spoke Hebrew were poor or lame or could not leave their work in the fields. She had gone herself with her family on other years. More often they stayed in Nazareth.

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She went out of the village, past the caves where the artisans had their workshops, to the orchards on the hillsides overlooking the town. She walked into the bright green shade of the pomegranates. Early blossoms dotted the ends of the branches with scarlet. A light breeze shifted the leaves, making the ground sparkle. She stopped by a trio of narrow trunks and rested her hand on the rough bark. She felt the warm strength pulse in her palm, living strength that was part hers and part tree.

"Gabriel," she called softly. There was no answer. A single bee hummed above her among the branches.

"Gabriel," she called again. "I am a woman now." The breeze blew along her cheek. She called a third time.

"Gabriel, I am afraid."

And he was there beside her.

She turned to him, and was surprised. He seemed smaller, his eyes only slightly above her own.

Have I grown so much? she thought.

"You have," he said. "In spirit, you have grown."

"I don't feel it," she said. But she realized that she did feel it, the strength that grew in her daily.

"You see?" he said. "You are a woman now, and more."

She considered that, running her hand along the wiry trunk.

"What happens now?" she asked finally.

"For one thing, your father will soon find you a husband." He smiled at her, almost a grin.

"But—" A husband. She felt even more confused. "But what of the sign? I thought. . . ."

"That you could not be both a wife and a queen?" The smile changed. He was a father, schooling a slow child. "Abraham had a wife. David had a queen. You must have a husband."

"And children?" It seemed too much to ask.

Gabriel's smile changed again. Miriam shrank back.

"That most of all," he said.

He took her hand and led her deeper into the orchard, passing from shadow to shadow like a vision. The shifting light caught in his beard and held her eyes.

"The sign, Mary, will be a child," he told her. "Your child. The child you will bear this winter."

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"The people have had their statesmen and their general. Now they need a healer, a mother."

She glanced up at his face, startled.

"But I am not even betrothed," she said. "This winter is too soon."

"This will not be your husband's son," Gabriel said, "although he will raise him as a son. This will be the Lord's son. And your son."

"A son." She felt a sudden pride. To have the luck of a first son. But it passed quickly.

"I don't understand," she said. "How will I bear the Lord's son?"

Gabriel laughed softly.

"As you would bear any child," he said.

"But how—"

"How will you beget this child?" Gabriel turned her toward him. He was serious now.

"That will be different, I'm afraid. But it will be done. And it will be today."

She stared up at his handsome face, suddenly afraid. Afraid of him, afraid of the future he offered. Afraid mostly of the act he seemed to propose. In all her dreams, in the years since he had first appeared to her, Gabriel had never been her lover.

"Why me?" Before, she had merely accepted. Now she must ask.

"You must be a virgin," he said, "or the sign will be ignored."

"No one will believe I am a virgin when I am pregnant."

"There will be other signs. And I will tell them. They will believe me."

"But why *me*?" She strained at the idea, tried to make him understand her fear. This was personal. This was her soul. No one else's.

But Gabriel only shrugged.

"You are here; you are a virgin. The people need a messiah. And the Lord wills it."

All her doubts came to a head. It was not enough that the Lord willed it.

"What kind of messiah can I be?" she said. "The people need a leader —like Abraham, or David."

"No," he said. He shook his head, and light danced in his hair. "The people have had their statesman and their general. Now they need a healer. Most of all, a mother." He squeezed her hand. His dark eyes held her.

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"You are the one," he told her. "Believe it."

Then he took both her hands and held them tightly. He closed his eyes, and his face was transformed. He was older, lined with frowning grace. He opened his eyes again, regarded her distant concern. And seemed to approve. The lines eased. Almost, he smiled. Then he bent and kissed her forehead.

Miriam gasped at the touch. A wave of feeling lifted her, spreading from the touch of his lips throughout her body, then centering to pulse below her belly. She closed her eyes, sagging against his hands. Another surge, and she went to her knees, sighing. Dimly, she felt the wind touch her cheeks, her neck, her clenched hands.

Then she was alone, kneeling in a pool of shadow beneath the flower-spotted canopy of an ancient, drooping pomegranate. She rested, feeling her breath settle as the pulsing in her loins eased to a smooth glow. She lifted her hands to her belly and closed her eyes, feeling... what? Nothing she could name. Something that she recognized as life.

Then a voice brought her eyes open in surprise.

"Are you all right?"

A young man knelt beside her. He stared searchingly at her face, heavy brows drawn with worry.

Miriam felt blood rush to her cheeks. She looked away, covered her mouth with her hand. For a moment she felt caught. Had he seen?

"You cried out," he said. "Did you faint?"

She looked back. His face showed nothing more than honest concern.

"Yes," she said. "I mean, no. I fell, I think."

"Are you hurt?" He had a sweet voice. She wondered if he was a chanter. But she noticed his plain, worn robe. Perhaps this was his orchard.

"No," she told him. "I am well, thank you."

He stood and offered his hand.

"Let me help you."

She hesitated for a moment, for they were strangers. But she looked again at his honest face and took his hand. He lifted her easily.

He was tall. *As tall as Gabriel,* she thought. But his hair and beard were dark and coarse, like her father's. And dusted with bits of wood that caught the scattered light.

"Thank you, sir," she said, letting go his hand. She looked down again. "I must go home now."

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"Do you live in Nazareth?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, knowing as he asked that he wanted her to stay longer. And she added, "I am Miriam, daughter of Hanani and Shimeon." Then she turned and hurried down the lane of trees. He did not follow, but she felt him watching until she turned toward the sunlit road and the trees came between them.

Some days after the feast of Passover, Shimeon hurried into their house in the evening. He was smiling broadly and holding his head much higher than usual. He said nothing as he sat on the rug before the dinner bowl, but he watched Hanani and Miriam with quick, happy eyes. Hanani brought the towels and washed his feet, and as she started to rise, he put his hand on her shoulder and bade her stay.

"I have news," he proclaimed. Hanani sat quietly, letting him have his moment. He smiled hugely at Miriam and then winked at Shmuel.

"I have found our Miriam a husband."

"Husband!" Hanani cried, and it was both an echo and praise for Shimeon. He laughed out loud.

"See, see," he said. "These things take time, but the Lord's will is always done. Eh, Daughter, what do you say?"

Miriam's ears rang. She opened her mouth, but no words came. Instead, tears filled her eyes. Her heart soared. Shimeon laughed again.

"Speechless for once. My, my. Come here now."

She went to him and knelt, and he embraced her. Then Hanani and even Shmuel took her in their arms, smiling.

"Well, who is he?" Hanani said finally, drying her eyes on the towel. "Who is this young man?"

"His name is Joseph," Shimeon said. "His father is Jacob, of Bethlehem in Judea."

"A Judean?" Hanani asked.

"From Nazareth now," Shimeon assured her. "They came here when the boy was a lad."

"But what does he do?" Hanani asked. Her smiles had faded.

"Well, he is a carpenter," Shimeon said, nervously smiling at the corners of the room. "He has a shop near the orchards."

"A carpenter?" Hanani cried. "You have married our daughter to a carpenter? A Judean carpenter?"

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"So he is an artisan," Shimeon said. "He is from Nazareth now. He is a good man."

"Is this one of your rabbi's choices?"

"No," Shimeon said, almost yelling. His pride had quickly turned to anger. "He came to me himself, asking after our daughter." He waved his hand in front of Hanani. "He is a good man," he repeated. "I have chosen him. It is done."

He sat in stony silence, while the rest of them watched, amazed at his outburst. Finally he looked back at Hanani and shrugged.

"He is a good man," he said, gently this time. He turned to Miriam. "He will come soon with his best man to say the vow. You will be betrothed tonight, my daughter."

"Tonight?" Hanani cried. "God above, Shimeon, not tonight?"

"Well, of course, tonight," he said, blinking. "Why not tonight?"

"You crazy man," she said, scrambling to her feet. "What am I to feed them? We have no meat, no new wine."

"What is wrong with this?" he said, gesturing to the bowl of porridge before him. "It's not a feast."

"It is our daughter's betrothal, and I will not shame her before her groom."

"She will not be ashamed," he said.

But Hanani took the bowl from the floor and carried it back to the hearth. She added more barley and began to slice cucumbers and leeks.

"Shmuel," she said. "Take a coin from my pouch. Go find some lamb. Quickly. And figs. Buy some figs. Miriam, get fresh water for the wine." She threw some sticks on the fire, muttering.

Shmuel knew better than to question that tone in her voice. He went quickly, and Miriam followed with her ewer. Shimeon sat bewildered on the rug. She stopped in the doorway and returned to kneel before him.

"Thank you, Father," she said. "I am honored."

Then she rushed out and down the alley toward the well.

She hurried back as fast as she could, splashing water on the ground and herself. But when she reached the doorway, she heard strange voices inside. She stopped, suddenly afraid. She was breathless from her run, still sweating and wet on one side from the water she had spilled. She wiped her face with a wet hand and tried to brush her hair into some order. She stilled her breathing.

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Then she heard a voice she knew, a sweet, clear voice, and her breathing rushed anew. She walked into the house. Her mother was still cooking, back toward the door. Shimeon and Shmuel sat on the rug, facing two men. Who turned as she entered. One was a stranger. But the other held her eyes. And smiled.

He rose quickly and took a step toward her. Then stopped awkwardly, hands loose at his side. Then his friend rose, and her father and Shmuel. Hanani turned from the hearth.

"Miriam," Shimeon said, "this is Joseph, your husband."

"Yes," she said, then realized that she should say something more. But all she could think of was: "You remembered me."

"Yes," he said. "And found you."

"What?" Shimeon said. "You've met before?"

"Just once," Joseph said. "Walking in the orchard."

Suddenly Miriam was aware of her father and mother and brother, looking back and forth between her and Joseph.

"Welcome," she said, to break the silence. Then, lifting the jug of water: "Excuse me, I. . . ."

"Of course, of course," Shimeon said. "Help your mother now." And he flurried around the two young men, seating them again on the rug and chatting aimlessly about weather, the recent seder, and finally, his favorite subject, the Law.

Miriam carried the water to the hearth. Her mother handed her a small pitcher half filled with wine. "Be careful," she said softly. "This is what there is."

Miriam poured in a generous helping of water and carried the pitcher to her father. He held up his cup, and she poured a small amount.

"Be generous, Daughter," he chided. "We are celebrating."

So she poured more, then filled the cups of Joseph and his friend and Shmuel.

Hanani pulled the lamb from the fire and set in on plates before the men. Miriam took the bowl of porridge, thickened now with vegetables and spiced with garlic, and set it on the floor before them. Then she and Hanani stood back.

Joseph rose again, with his friend, who smiled.

"I am Amos, Levi's son," the friend told her.

Shimeon laughed self-consciously and stood up.

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"Forgive me," he said. "In my joy, I have forgotten my manners. Shmuel, get up."

They stood in a small circle around Joseph and Miriam. Joseph reached into his robe and brought forth a cluster of freshly picked scarlet flowers. They were from a pomegranate. He handed them to her, then held both her hands in his own. They were calloused and large and surrounded hers so only the flowers showed.

Then he said simply in his clear voice, "She is my wife, and I her husband, from today and forever."

Shimeon laughed and hugged them both as they stood there. Amos took her hand and bowed to her while Shmuel and Joseph called each other "Brother."

Then the men returned to the rugs and began to eat.

Shimeon quickly called for more wine, and Miriam poured what there was. She looked at her mother, who only frowned and shrugged. The meal continued, and then Joseph raised his cup, smiling into her eyes.

Miriam went to get the pitcher. She poured in what was left from the jug of wine, but it was less than a cupful. She filled the pitcher with water. But she couldn't bring herself to return to the men. To pour plain water for her husband. She felt angry at her father, for giving no warning. But then she remembered his joy that day, his happy confusion, and forgave him.

And she felt the warmth growing in her hands as she held the pitcher. She felt strength flowing through her fingers. Her palms tingled.

The pitcher was filled with wine.

She smiled then, and tears came to her eyes. She thanked God for the gift, and turned back to the room. Her mother watched, amazed, as she filled everyone's cup. And Shimeon chided her again.

"Well, Daughter, more care. You'll have us all drunk." He raised his glass in toast to his new son-in-law.

And so began the year of their betrothal.

Although Miriam would not move to Joseph's house until their marriage, a year away, she went as often as she could to see him. Usually her mother went with her, or Rachael. Often she took him food or some small gift of her making, and he would carve her whimsical shapes from scraps of cedar and olive wood. They would eat the midday meal together in the shaded doorway of his shop, or in the orchard nearby. They talked of

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small things, or of nothing, and she was happy.

But in the third month of their betrothal, she awoke one morning and felt the child move inside her. A flutter, like a moth held against the cheek. The quickening of life. She lay still and thought of the strange fate thrust upon her. A fate she had accepted gladly enough when she realized she would share it with Joseph. If he, too, could accept it.

That day she went to him alone. She waited quietly outside on the dusty road while he finished dealing with a customer. Then she stepped inside. The room was cool and scented with the pitch of a dozen woods. Shavings rustled under her feet. Joseph looked up from his bench and smiled. He showed her two silver talents, freshly stamped with the face of the emperor.

"Payment in advance," he said, "and from a tax collector. The Lord does have a sense of humor."

"Sometimes," she agreed.

He put the coins in his pouch and turned back to her.

"You're early," he said. "And alone?"

She nodded.

"Well," he said. "The Lord smiles on me twice in one morning."

He came to her and took her hands, then hugged her gently. She returned the embrace, and held him when he would have stopped. He laughed and brushed her hair with his lips.

"It will be a long year," he said, not for the first time.

Then she let him go. She stepped back and looked up at his face. She opened her mouth, to tell him what else the Lord had done for them. But his smile stopped her words. She turned away, uncertain now. Gabriel had promised her a husband, but had not named him. Joseph was the man she wanted.

He sensed her mood, watching gravely as she wandered deeper into the shop, touching his bench, his tools, everything but the man himself. Once, he opened his mouth, ready to speak, it seemed. But he shook his head and went to sit by his bench, waiting. His eyes held the same honest concern she had first seen. She began a silent prayer to Gabriel, then stopped, thinking, *This is my husband, and my child. I must tell him myself.*

So finally she turned to him and said, "Joseph, I am going to have a child." And watched his eyes cloud with confusion and disbelief.

"I don't understand," he said. "Have a child? But we're betrothed."

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"Yes, we are betrothed, and I am honored to call you 'Husband.' I want very much to be your wife. But I am also with child."

He stared at her, unmoving, hardly seeming to breathe. Only his eyes showed the trouble in his heart.

"Whose is it?" he asked. His voice was strained and low.

Then Miriam hesitated again. How to tell him this? How to say, "I am the Messiah," without sounding the fool and troubling his belief even further?

"Mine," she said. "Mine and the Lord's. No man had a part in this, Joseph. I am a virgin, believe me. This is a holy child."

"You are still a virgin?"

"Yes."

"And you are my wife. And you are with child." Finally he moved, raising his open hand as if to shrug. But his fists clenched and his face twisted. He stood suddenly and turned aside.

"How can I believe this?" he said. "A virgin with child? The Lord's child? I want a wife, Miriam, not a bastard wrapped in old prophecies. Next you'll claim you bear the Messiah."

She lowered her eyes before his anger.

"No," she said, "he is not the Messiah." She raised her eyes again, suddenly calm. "And he is not a bastard. I will bear him this winter, and my husband will help me to raise him and will love him like a son. I was promised this, and I believe it."

He turned his head toward her, and she saw the anger drain from his eyes. But what it left was cold and hollow. He looked down at his bench, lifted a mallet in his rough hands, unseeing.

"This winter," he said. "We wouldn't be married till next spring." He tapped the mallet lightly on the thick bench. His shoulders sagged. "How can you ask this of me, Miriam? To love this child? To watch you swell and freshen with another man's seed?"

"No man, Joseph. I swear. I will be your wife, completely."

He looked at her again. Then he let the mallet fall and turned away.

"No. I will write your father a letter. I—"

He covered his mouth with his hand and closed his eyes. Miriam took one step toward him, hand raised to touch him. But he turned his back to her.

"No," he said. "Leave me. I will write a letter. Let it go at that. Now leave me."

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Her hands were hot; strength pulsed in her fingertips. But she did not know how to touch him. She hugged herself instead and tried desperately to hold the calm around her. She left before it broke and let tears flood through.

She spent the day behind a wall of grief. People spoke to her, and she did not hear. Her mother handed her a broom, and she did not feel. At dinner she spilled wine on her father. She burned her hand on the hearth. Her family watched her strangely, but her silence drew silence from them. She would not be approached.

And that night she dreamed. She lay on a bed of straw, while her belly grew and twitched from the child inside. Her mother stood beside her, and Rachael, and they drew her up on a birthing stool and rubbed her swelling body, chanting. Then her belly clenched three times, and the child came forth into her mother's hands. Who kissed it and handed it to her.

It had Gabriel's face. And it reached out a tiny hand and said, "Go to your husband now. Go to Joseph."

And it lowered its head to her breast and sucked.

She awoke in the early dawn. The rest of her family still slept in the gray light that drifted in through the narrow doorway. She rose without waking them, donned her robes, and left. The alleyway was empty, the air still cool. The sky was clear. She felt calm again.

She went quietly through the streets to Joseph's house, but he was not there; nor was he in the workshop beside it. She stood a moment in the doorway, watching the shadows shorten beneath the growing sun. Then she knew.

She went to the orchard, into the cool shade of the pomegranates. And found him there, walking slowly among the ancient trees. They hung with unripe fruit now, small and green in clusters at the ends of the branches. A few late blossoms caught the early light like promises yet fulfilled.

He saw her coming, and stopped, watching as she drew near. She went up to him and looked into his eyes. They were filled with dark light.

"There was much you didn't tell me yesterday," he said. "About this child. About you."

"Would you have believed?"

He considered, and shook his head.

"No." He ran a hand through his hair, looked around at the orchard as though surprised he was there.

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"An angel came to me last night, Mary. Miriam, I mean. An angel." He shook his head, this time in wonder. "I still don't know what to believe."

"What did he tell you?"

He looked at her strangely.

"Who you are," he said. "And why this child must be." He took her hand. "I wanted a wife, and children, that's all. I wanted you. Yesterday I thought I had lost you. Today I have you again. But so much more."

"Too much?" she asked. Her heart sang with hope.

He lifted her hand and kissed it.

"No," he said. "I pray not."

She laughed and threw her arms around him, then spun away, flushed with happiness. He laughed, too, lowly at first, but then aloud in his clear, fine voice.

She reached up and touched his cheek. Then, impulsively, reached behind him and pulled a hard, smooth fruit from the tree. She held it out, and it ripened in her hand, now swollen and red-gold in her palm. She gave it to him. He took it slowly and held it, looking back and forth to her and the ripened fruit in wonder.

THEY TOLD her family that day, but they told them no more than the fact that she was with child. Her father wrung his hands, speechless. Shmuel frowned with the intensity of youth. Her mother covered her eyes and turned away. Then Joseph offered to take Miriam quietly into his house that day, and her father blustered with relief, insisting there was no hurry, that these things happened, that the forms be followed.

But her mother was more practical. Two weeks later, Joseph prepared a wedding feast, smaller perhaps than he might have, and not the customary six days, but joyful nonetheless. Shimeon presented the full dowry and ate heartily. The rabbi couldn't bless the marriage until their year was done, but Miriam moved into Joseph's house and became his wife.

And the first days were simple and happy. But people talk, even good people, and such small scandals seem for a time more outrageous than the adulteries of the Romans. It had never occurred to Joseph that his neighbors would consider the child his — or wonder if it was not his. The friendliest rumors came with a wink, and a comment on his prowess.

Once, in a dark moment, he told Amos the truth. But Amos made it a joke.

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"The mudslingers are just jealous of her earthly charms," he said, "though she's certainly pretty enough to be an angel. Take pride in your good taste, and her willingness."

And Miriam spoke to her mother, but Hanani would not listen.

"Don't talk to me of miracles," she said. "I hear enough from your father. He sees the Messiah in every hot-mouthed youth who dares insult the Romans."

It was well that Joseph's parents were dead, for that would have been another burden. Instead, they lived alone and found comfort in each other. And Miriam found something else, a strength and calm she hadn't known, flowing from the warmth of her hands. She worked no miracles, but she rubbed the knots from Joseph's back and smoothed his brow with her kisses, and that was enough.

In his turn, Joseph treated her with respect, talking now not just of little things, but also bigger matters, of business and politics and even Law. He heard her out, deferred to her opinions. There was something of awe in his manner. And she liked it. She had more respect for herself. She realized that she could indeed be the queen that Gabriel described.

But as her belly grew, so did the rumors, until it took all her strength and calm to walk to the well in the morning. Joseph had it easier, for it was accepted by then that the child was his. And adultery was a woman's sin. So other women often greeted her with smug smiles, patted her belly without leave, and made comments on how fast she seemed to blossom.

One day she lost her calm and poured a jug of water over one old crone. Then she laughed so hard she became dizzy. After that, many women avoided her. They wanted shame and contrition from her, not calm and defiance. She longed for the birth, when Gabriel would appear and remove the stain from her and the child.

When the news came of the census, she was relieved. Joseph was ordered to Bethlehem, to the city of his birth. She was in her ninth month, and it was the rainy season, but the decree took them from Nazareth to a place where they were not known and could have the child in peace. Hanani was loud in her condemnation of the emperor, for she wanted to birth the child, and Miriam felt a brief disquiet when they parted, but her happiness grew as they left Nazareth behind.

Joseph led the donkey he had borrowed, and she rode for the most part. It rained on them often, but the sun shone, too, and it was not too cold.

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They were five days to Jerusalem, through Nain and Shunem and Jezreel, around the foot of Gilboa and south down the valley of the Jordan River. At Jericho they turned west and climbed out of the river valley and into the hills of Judea. The way became rougher, the ground drier and stony and brown.

The road was crowded with travelers, and they joined a small group of pilgrims, as much for protection as company. As they entered Bethany, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, at the end of the fourth day, a crowd came out of the town to a field below the road. In their center they pushed and dragged a small figure in black, who cowered from their hands and words.

"What is this?" Joseph asked a fellow traveler.

The man shrugged. "Looks like they're punishing someone," he said. He went down into the field to the edge of the crowd, then hurried back. His face was set.

"They're stoning a woman," he said, and even then they heard a shrill cry and saw the first stone strike her on the back. "For adultery."

Joseph and Miriam looked at each other and turned away. And Miriam felt the child stir in her belly, and thought, *I will end this. When I am queen.*

She saw other things she would end. Before the gate of Jerusalem, the road was flanked by crosses holding the rotting bodies of criminals and rebels. Lepers stood beneath them, necks hung with bells, begging. A would-be prophet shouted prayers and curses from the hillside. Squads of Roman soldiers strode through the crowded streets, pushing aside old men and women who could not scurry out of their way. But the stoning affected her the most. It could have been her own fate had Joseph not loved her.

Never again, she thought. Gentle strength pulsed in her hands, waiting to be called.

They pushed their way through Jerusalem and out the other side, and another day brought them to Bethlehem.

The town was crowded. Caravans passed through daily, to and from Hebron, and many stopped to provision there before pressing southward. Joseph had no near relatives he could call on, so they went from inn to inn, seeking room. It was past dark before an innkeeper's wife took pity on them and offered them space in the stable.

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The place was clean, surprisingly, and the wife brought them blankets and a lantern and a small meal. They made a bed in the straw and lay down to sleep.

"I'm sorry," Joseph said as he cradled her head in his arm. "You should have better."

"No matter," she replied. "At least we can afford it."

He laughed softly.

"The old prophets will roll in their graves when our child is born," he said. "The Messiah they foretold would bring down fire on the town and raise a bed of gold from the ashes."

"They foretold a messiah for their own times. I am for this time."

She kissed him then and settled to sleep. But she thought over his words, and remembered he had said *our* child.

Early the next morning, Miriam went into labor. Joseph would have rushed out to find a midwife, but she bade him wait. She knew the first part of the labor could last many hours. She was able to eat and drink between contractions, and walked out on the street for a while. Joseph fretted around her, and finally set about making a bed for the child from a manger in the stall.

That evening she felt the change in her labor, and asked for a midwife. When the woman arrived, a sturdy matron who reminded Miriam a little of Hanani, she told them of the star.

"Go out and see," the midwife said. "Go on: the walk will only help you. Brighter than the moon, it is, and right over the town. The priests are reading their books tonight, I tell you."

So they went out, and there is was, casting shadows in the twilight streets, burning blue-white above them. Joseph held her by the shoulders, his body stiff with awe.

"Did Gabriel mention this?" he asked.

"No," she said. "But he promised there would be signs."

He shivered then, though the night was dry and still. She held his hand and knew the past six months were just now becoming real for him.

It was not a hard labor. She had helped with worse and with better and knew what to expect. The midwife knew her trade and made it easier where she could. Only the starlight shining in through the open door made the birth seem strange.

But as she pushed the child from her, the warmth in her hands spread

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throughout her body. She gasped, not from pain, but from the surge of spirit. Then she reached down and pulled the child to her chest, cord draped along her belly and into her body. It was a boy, and very much alive. More than a sign, her child. She held him to her till the afterbirth slipped from her and the midwife insisted.

So the woman took the child and cut the cord. Then she rubbed his body with salt and oil to harden his muscles, and swaddled him in clothes given by her sister Rachael in Nazareth in what seemed like a former life.

Miriam lay back on the straw and watched, and music played in her ears. Joseph came to stand by her, not touching, as the Law demanded, but close and warm. He frowned once and looked around, as if he heard something, too, and she smiled, knowing that the music sang in the starlight throughout the land.

Then the midwife gave her the child. It sucked briefly and fell asleep at her breast. Joseph paid the woman in silver — Miriam insisted — and they were alone.

He sat by her in the straw, staring at the child with a faint smile. Then he frowned again and cocked his head.

"Do you hear?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"So it begins." He sighed and touched the child on the cheek.

"Are you sorry?" she asked.

He considered.

"No," he said finally. "But I am afraid." He touched the boy again. "All I wanted was a wife and a child."

Once again she could not touch him when he needed to feel the strength in her.

"You have them both," she told him. "We will not leave you."

He found a smile for her. "I pray for that every day."

Then they heard a commotion in the yard, men's voices, and the innkeeper's wife answering them. Joseph rose and started for the door, but the woman rushed in, flustered.

"Shepherds," she said. "A whole flock of them, asking to see the child. Should I let them in? Who are they?"

"I don't know," Joseph said. He looked at Miriam in dismay. "So soon?" he asked. "The child is barely born."

Miriam was calm, knowing this would have come sooner or later.

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"Let them in," she said. "They must see to believe."

The wife looked from one to the other, bewildered.

"Let them come in," Joseph told her.

She went out, muttering.

And as she left, Gabriel appeared before them. He was robed in silver, and the starlight limned his hair and beard. Joseph stepped back in awe, but Gabriel smiled slightly and seemed less godly. He stepped forward and knelt by Miriam. He touched the child. A frown crossed his face. He looked at Miriam, and she felt suddenly cold.

"Was there much pain?" he asked. She heard the meaning in his voice. These were not the words he had to say.

"No," she said, wondering what made him hesitate, he who had known her very thoughts.

"That, at least, went well," he said. He looked back down at the sleeping child and sighed. "This was not foreseen, Mary."

"What?"

But then the shepherds came in, and Gabriel was behind her, arms raised, shining.

"Is this he?" one asked. "Is this the child who will be King of the Jews?"

"What?" Miriam asked.

"It is." Gabriel spoke from behind her, his words echoing in the small place.

She tried to rise, to turn to him, but he held her shoulders.

"This is his mother," he said, "a virgin, for she and her husband are but betrothed." The shepherds stared at her, murmuring. "And this is the child who will be the Messiah."

Miriam tried to cry out, but a hand seemed to hold her mouth. She looked to Joseph, desperately, but he stared past her at Gabriel. And in his face there was joy.

Then the child woke and cried, and the shepherds bowed to her and to Joseph and went out, talking among themselves in low voices. Others greeted them in the stableyard, and they spoke with wonder, moving away down the street.

Miriam crouched in the straw, holding the child, staring at the eldritch light from the star, numb. Gabriel came before her again, looking down.

"They would not have the mother," he said. "They wanted the son. They would hear only of the son."

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She stared at him, hardly hearing. He offered her a final smile, but she looked away.

"This was not foreseen," he said again, a hint of wonder in his own voice.

Then Miriam became aware of the child crying in her arms. She gave him her breast, and he sucked. And she felt the strength flowing out of her into him. She trembled. Joseph knelt beside her and touched her shoulder, and she did not care that she was unclean and he broke the Law.

"Wife," he said. "Miriam."

His eyes were filled with love. And his voice with relief. For a moment she hated him.

But there was another strength in her. Her own. And the calm stayed with her. She looked down at the child and saw in him the life that should have been hers. They wanted the son. So be it. But he would first be *her* son. And she would raise him to rule as she would have ruled. There was love in her heart, and he would have the power of that.

But now there was also pain. She felt tears start in her eyes. She looked up at Gabriel, in his robes and fiery beard, and saw that he had become smaller. Then the tears came, and he was a blur against the starlight.

"Go now," she told him. "Go, and let me tend to my family."

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Next month: Two exceptional novelets: "Sentry" by Jack Dann and Jack C. Haldeman, an actionful SF story set on a space station, and "The Time of the Worm" a fantasy chiller from a master, Bob Leman. Also in the February issue will be the report on Competition 44, which was squeezed out of this issue.

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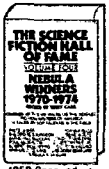

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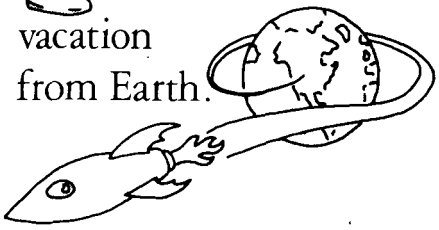

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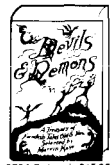

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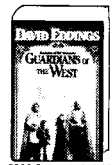

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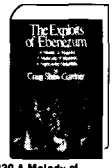

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